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Chapter 1: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Preview:

That's Qibli!" Fatespeaker yelped excitedly, pointing an eager talon towards a scarred Sandwing.

Winter looked over in his direction and saw him talking excitedly with a much smaller Sandwing, their voices were drowned amidst the loud chatter, but he radiated positivity and intellect.

At the mention of his name, Qibli looked over and shot them a friendly grin.

Winter paused; holding his breath when Qiblis eyes flickered to meet his gaze. Winter tensed before quickly looking away indignantly.

"I think you'll like him," assured the Nightwing attendant, brushing off Winter's reaction with an amused brow, "he's very friendly!"

Winter scrunched his nose, "What exactly is a 'clawmate'?" He inquired, suddenly worried for what it meant for him.

"Great question! One I've been getting all day, too. Your clawmates are the dragonets who you'll share a sleeping cave with." Fatespeaker explained helpfully

"WHAT?!" roared an outraged Winter suddenly, causing Icicle to glare at him and for Fatespeaker to jump in alarm.

Winter thought that for pretty much all his life he'd been dealt the worst possible hand.

His sister was more cunning; more clever; more impressive. Fit to

someday succeed his aunt's throne. His older brother, Hailstorm, was ambitious and charismatic, ranking just below the highest military position possible only after his second year of hunting.

It wasn't fair, Winter had NOTHING going for him, other than being Queen Glaciers nephew, and even that status could carry him so far within his family dynamic.

He was disgraced. Deemed about as 'frightening as an angry scavenger' - which would have been worth something IF they weren't a delicacy his family frequently enjoyed at dinner.

He supposed it was true, perhaps he lacked the ambition or the confidence needed to wield his authority properly, even more so since he failed to protect his older brother - his only saving grace in a family constantly ready to feed Winter to the wolves.

But not anymore.

Winter and Icicle were being shipped to Jade Mountain Academy for their first official education. Despite Winters initial protests, he concluded that this may actually be the best way to save his own hide and redeem himself to his family.

This would be a blank slate; he could make himself into anything he wanted to this year. Of course, naturally, Winter was not thrilled to mingle with dragons from other tribes, but he hoped that the students from his own tribe would give him the proper leverage he would need.
He WOULD make a name for himself! One so that dragons couldn't look down their snouts and sneer at him like he was lower than them. They would all see!

Which is why Winter now stood at the mouth of a yawning cave, scowling and stiff as he fiercely gripped his pet scavenger's cage. His icy eyes watched his parents wings back to the Ice Kingdom. His sister wore a similar disgruntled expression, but was the first to start entering the school, muttering angry words to herself.

Winter sighed longing for the snow he'd grown so accustomed to in the Ice Kingdom but jogged after her nevertheless as they entered a

much darker, much warmer, and much more stifling environment.

Blending into the shadows sat a Nightwing grinning as she waved after another young timid dragon who exited moments before Winter entered. The name tag on the Nightwing attendant read, "Fatespeaker"

His features recoiled and contorted with disgust. Was it just him, or were there already far too many Nightwings? He sized her up, and it took everything in him not to constantly scowl at her whenever she spoke. Which was a lot.

Icicle checked them in, hardly listening while Fatespeaker prattled happily about the school. Winter ignored her, busying himself instead by scrutinizing the surroundings suspiciously.

Just get me out here...and away from her already! He thought agonizingly Fatespeaker mentioned his name and instantly snapped him out of his wishful thoughts.

"annnnd... Winter! Your clawmates are... - oh, look! Actually, there's one of them over there! That's Qibli!" Fatespeaker yelped excitedly, pointing an eager talon towards a scarred Sandwing.

Winter looked over in his direction and saw him talking excitedly with a much smaller Sandwing, their voices were drowned amidst the loud chatter, but he radiated positivity and intellect.

At the mention of his name, Qibli looked over and shot them a friendly grin.

Winter paused; holding his breath when Qiblis eyes flickered to meet his gaze. Winter tensed before quickly looking away indignantly.

"I think you'll like him," assured the Nightwing attendant, brushing off Winter's reaction with an amused brow, "he's very friendly!"

"Definitely not." Winter assured her, irritated that his question was ignored, "What exactly is a clawmate?

"Hmm," Fate speaker mused, ignoring Winter *AGAIN* as she giggled,

"maybe you'd also like Moon.., she asked me the same exact question just before you got here."

Unlikely, thought Winter. He knew better than to befriend any conniving worm that attended school here.

Winter scrunched his nose subtly in disgust at the idea.

"Your clawmates are the dragonets who you'll be sharing a sleeping cave with." Fatespeaker explained, helpfully

"WHAT?!" roared an outraged Winter suddenly, causing Icicle to glare at him and for Fatespeaker to jump in alarm.

"And who would I have to talk to so I can change that? In case you didn't know, hello, I am Queen Glaciers nephew. And I'm sure you cannot possibly be serious about me sleeping with other dragons." He stuck his snout in the air haughtily, as though Fatespeaker would sense his supreme authoritative aura and change the rooming arrangements at once. But instead, he was met with a look of pure amusement.

"You're a funny one!" she observed, "I'm actually friends with a queen too! Queen Glory? You know her, right? She's pretty royal and awesome." She gushed, ignoring Winters glower,
"but I guess if you want a room change," she continued, "maybe you could ask Sunny or Clay, they might be able to help you. Oh, but I really hope you like your clawmates! Just give them a chance! We picked them specifically for you!"

Winter grumbled as she turned and bellowed, "Next!" Signaling for the next dragon family to come forward to have their ears talked off by her incessant prattling

"Idiot." Icicle mouthed at him, trotting past him down a hallway. Once she was out of sight it occurred to Winter that he had failed to atcually get the directions to his dorm, he must have missed them in the sea of Fatespeaker's rambling.

He wandered aimlessly (while still looking confident and regal!) until he felt the warm presence of scales sidle up beside him.

"Hey, clawmate," greeted Qibli "or... can I still call you that? Did you get your room changed?" He asked teasingly

Winter scowled at him, already disliking the disrespect being shown. (Even as poor Qibli tried his hardest to earn Winters approval.)

"No, I didn't." Said Winter stiffly, "but that will change. I'm getting a room change TOMORROW." He stamped a little faster away from Quibli

"I guess you'll have to make do with me until then," he replied dramatically, catching up to Winter with ease, "Im Qibli, by the way."

"I know," Winter scowled before introducing himself. "I'm Winter. As in: Queen Glaciers nephew Winter. As in: show a little more respect."

"Oh, so we're doing that? Uhhh, I'm Qibli. As in: Queen Thorns right claw? At your service, your majesty." Qibli mocked, evidently not caring who Winter was related to. Even with Qiblis head faced down, there was an unmistakably irritating curl of his snout contorted into a smirk.

Winter snorted before realizing his reaction. He earned a grin from Qibli, and he quickly kept walking, trying to wipe his small smile, which he'd hidden from Qiblis view off his face.

As if this dragon needed any more self-confidence.

They walked in silence for a moment, and Winter listened to the quiet drippings of wet stalactites. It dawned upon him that this wasn't at all what he'd expected from the academy. Were schools always so quiet? Or were there just no dragons nearby?

"Winter?" Came Qibli's voice a moment later. He glanced around soaking in the scenery.

"What?"

"Where are we going?" He asked sheepishly

"To **my** cave, obviously." Winter replied shortly, emphasizing his possession of the room in the sentence. If he had it his way, he wouldn't be sharing anything for much longer

"I hate to break it to you, but the sleeping caves were back there." informed the Sandwing

Winter huffed, stopping to look around before stomping his way in the other direction.

"It would have been nice if they told me." He grumbled in defense

"It would have been nice if you listened." he retorted with fake innocence.

Know-it-all, Winter thought darkly as he let Qibli properly lead the way back down the illuminated corridors towards the sleeping caves.

I don't think I'll be able to stand a single night with this sand snorter.

Chapter 2: An IceWings Mistake

Preview:

"Please, just let us go. We're together." Qibli negotiated, still tense and evaluating his choices

"Oh, he's with you, is he?" The Seawing mocked, barking out a laugh

"Yes. He is." Qibli replied firmly

As Qibli lead the way back to the sleeping dorms, they passed a pair of Seawings gushing in the hallways, whispering about Queen Corals daughter, Anenome, attending school at Jade Mountain. He caught snippets of,

"Princess Anenome.... school HERE!...protect her..."

Winter stopped abruptly and frowned as the two Seawings passed him. Why weren't the Icewing students bragging like that about HIM being in school? Qibli's talons clicked to a stop upon realizing that that Winter was no longer walking with him. He quickly hurried back to arch a confused brow at him.

Winter wouldn't be Queen Glaciers nephew if he didn't take the opportunity to boast his own his royal lineage. Winter craftily informed,

"The Princess is here? Well, I'm Winter, Queen Glaciers nephew."

Beside him, Qibli smiled to himself at he held up 3 claws, as though he were keeping track of something. Winter shot him a look.

The Seawings stopped and exchanged looks. A turquoise Seawing

joked, "I guess there's enough royal representatives here for a diplomatic meeting Isn't that something?"

"Though I can't imagine how much agreeing you'd get from an Icewing." Added a lime Seawing, either not caring or seemingly forgetting that Winter could hear them.

Dissatisfied from their underwhelmed reaction and plagued by his own internalized disappointment by the lack of proper acknowledgement, Winter prodded, "I'm Queen Glaciers nephew. I'm a PRINCE!" he enunciated slowly

The Seawings looked annoyed, "So? Why should we care?"

Winter ruffled his wings indignantly. Hwas it so hard for other tribes to exhibit proper mannerisms and respect for him?

"So? It means that I'm a royal prince! At this school!" He explained somewhat desperately

"Barely" muttered the lime green Seawing

"But you're not our princess or our Queen." Acknowledged the first Seawing, "It doesn't really mean anything to us if you're an Icewing prince or not, it doesn't change the fact that you were at war with us."

Nothing to them? Winter roared internally, *How could they even say that?!*

Internally, Winter was cursing them out, however on the outside, he simply lifted his chin higher to express oozing confidence.

"Well, it should. The IceWings are a tribe of prestige and intellect, we NEVER would have allowed our palace to be destroyed. Can you say the same?" He snarled before he could stop himself. He knew he had struck a chord when the Seawings slowly approached him, forming a menacing circle around him.

Winter felt a twinge of alarm but remained still with his chest puffed out and his eyes firm. He would not show weakness.

Other passing dragonets stopped to watch, presumably, the first showdown of the year with unbridled curiosity. Peering in for a closer look, their chants demanding a fight between them.

Even with the Seawing, mere meters away, the scent of saltwater fish heavy on his tongue, Winter stood confidently, sure that his status and confidence would see him through.

"You watch your frozen tongue, Icewing." Spat the Seawing leering towards

Winter was silent as he peered down his snout at him.

"I hope you have a good view of all these dragons here and the dragons you killed in the war, because it may be the last time you ever see-"

"Hey, now..." Qibli interjected softly, stepping in between Winter and the aggressive Seawing, "we came here to end an era of war, not reinvent it and let it divide us more." Said Qibli diplomatically

"As if HE would understand ANYTHING about Queen Coral or the attack on Summer Palace. He probably hasn't ever feared for his life like we have! A bad day for him was not eating walrus at dinner! A bad day for us was DEATH!" Exclaimed the Seawing, wild with fury

Winter bit back a flashing memory of Hailstorm and the Skywings. He shook it out of his head and kept watching. They had no idea what they were talking about, but he also knew they would never believe him even if he tried to dispute their claims.

He didn't have to take this.

"How about I freeze your talons and tail and I snap them off one by one, so you know what true fear is?" threatened Winter to the Seawing insultingly

"Easy." Qibli advised over his shoulder to Winter

"And what are you doing defending him?" Scowled the Seawing.

More dragonets crowded in the small hallway to hear.

"Or rather, I'm asking, what would a Sandwing's motive be in protecting an Icewing prince? Were you on Blaze's side?" The Seawing snarled

"I don't have a motive," Qibli replied calmly, as he spread his scarred wings to shield Winter from the seething Seawing. "I was always for Thorn. I just don't think we need to cause a fight over this."

Even as Qibli stood there, wings outstretched, Winter could see his black eyes flickering at and around the Seawing contemplatively.

What is he doing? Winter thought

"I don't want to fight you. I'm sorry that he insulted you, he doesn't really mean it. He can't help that he's stuck up." Qibli insisted, "Please, just let us go. We're together." Qibli negotiated, still tense and evaluating his choices

"Oh, he's with you, is he?" The Seawing mocked, barking out a laugh

"Yes. He is." Qibli replied firmly

"Well, you sure do make an odd couple. An arrogant prince and his knight in shining scales. How wonderful." He mocked

"His 'majesty' and his knight" a few dragonets in the crowd laughed.

Stragglers who showed up late were in for a surprise. Showing up late echoed in judgement, "couple?" and "An IceWing and a Sandwing... together? That's a little too much for the first day..."

Winters heart lurched as he realized the fatal mistake they'd made. Realizing that some of them had misinterpreted Qibli, Winter gripped the bridge of his nose exasperatedly. If only he had just handled this himself! He could have probably won; besides, wounds could be healed.

Reputation could not.

Winter quickly intercepted them, clarifying as fiercely as he could,

"Howling storms! No!" Winter shouted, stepping out from behind Qibli, "We're not 'together' together! That'd be bizarre! I don't even like him!"

Qibli turned to look at him, hurt showing in the creases of his eyes as he played it off, joking, "Come on, I'm not THAT bad..."

Winter scowled and shot him a 'not helping' look

"Don't confuse the two. I have standards." He declared finally, "I am Queen Glaciers nephew, after all." In the corner of his eye, he caught Qibli holding up a pathetic 4. Winter chose to ignore him.

Taking one last look at the crowd of dragons, he swore he'd remember their faces. He turned on his talons and marched down the hallway leaving stunned dragons behind.

After Qibli caught up, they walked in a tense silence.

"That's enough insulting and angering other dragons for one day, I think." Qibli told Winter, the overlaying sternness pricking him like thorns

Winter flared and asked, "Why did you even bother saying anything?"

After the initial adrenaline rush had worn off, he panicked, worrying that if word got home somehow that he was dating a SANDWING on the first day of school, he would probably be unenrolled and put on an iceberg in the middle of the ocean on the outskirts of the kingdom for the rest of his life.

And frankly, that sounded maybe worse than his current social standing within his family

"Why?" Qibli challenged, "Because you were about to be beaten by a bunch of Seawings, lord genius! It's not my fault they twisted my words! Most of them know what I meant." Qibli assured Winter

"It certainly didn't do us any favors." huffed the Icewing

"Maybe," he agreed, "But we got out of there unscathed, didn't we? Though, I'm starting to feel like maybe I should've let you get clawed, seeing as how you don't appreciate me." He groaned

Winter considered his words. He stared thoughtfully up at the ceiling, playing his next cards carefully as he muttered barely loud enough for Qibli to hear.

"I'm glad you didn't..."

Qibli bumped his shoulder, taking the bait "Hey, let's get you and your scavenger something to eat." He suggested

Winter glanced down at the scavenger cage he'd absentmindedly been lugging all morning. A small smirk tugging at his snout. Qibli was more useful as a friend than an enemy.

They entered their dorm hallway, arriving just in time to see Clay prevent another fight from breaking out.

"I guess fighting's the theme today." Noticed the Sandwing, brushing past the other dragons to enter their dorm.

"Whatever. We need to get my scavenger something to eat. He's been moping around and not eating lately." Winter worried as he let Qibli place both of their welcoming scrolls in their provided scroll rack.

"Maybe he's trying to starve himself because he hates you that much." Qibli joked, reappearing at Winters side to peer into the cage

"No, he's not! Scavengers don't do that!" Winter exclaimed anxiously and defensively, "Just hurry it up or he might actually starve to death because of YOU!"

"Whatever you say." Qibli replied

Chapter 3: Explanations

Preview:

Winter froze in place, sending a glare so icy to Qibli, that the other could practically hear his furious roar: 'you better fix this NOW'. Qibli shivered slightly

"Clearly, there has been some sort of misunderstanding," Qibli started, stepping forward

"No need to be bashful Qibli. I know that Sandwing purity is kind of a big deal in the Sand kingdom, but the war is over! It shouldn't matter what tribe the dragon you're dating is from. The other dragons will understand that soon enough." she assured fiercely, taking his talons in hers, "And I know my mother would be proud of you too!"

"Thanks, but we're not -" Qibli tried again, looking to Clay for assistance, only to be cut off by said dragon.

While Winter and Qibli were in the dorm getting situated, Qibli asked to actually see the scavenger that Winter had been carrying around for the past few hours or so, believing it to either be fake or dead. Winter reluctantly agreed, not one to back down from an argument, but not before forcing Qibli to swear up and down that he would not lay a talon against it.

Qibli agreed with a roll of his eyes, and open went the cage door. And suddenly, the scavenger bolted out from the cage and ran out the entrance of the cave.

Winters eyes went wide as Qibli blinked slowly for half a heartbeat, shocked by the sudden agility of Winters pet, but he was bounding after it just as quick.

"How could you let it escape?" Winter yelled at Qibli, "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you. Catch it!"

Qibli nodded, wincing at Winter who was close on his tail. Winter and Qibli chased the scavenger as it frantically dove and maneuvered in between dragons' tails and legs. Many admired the scavenger like it was tasty potential waiting to happen.

*Not **MY** scavenger.* thought Winter protectively as he snipped and lashed his spiky tail at any dragons who went reaching for it.

As the scavenger turned the first wide corner it saw into a crowded, and expansive room, with a ceiling that rose so high that it looked like the night sky. Qibli tried to dive for the scavenger, his clamped talons gleaming, barely missing it. At the scene of Qiblis brute force, Winters eyes nearly launched out of his head.

"Watch the claws! Are you trying to kill it?!" he snarled at Qibli

Qibli shrugged guiltily, as they continued to shove their way through wings and tails, all of whom were watching or trying to catch their own prey running rampant around the room.

The dining hall, Winter realized with a start, his eyes searching, *out of all the places it could have run to, this is probably the worst one.*

Surrounding dragons looked between Qibli, Winter, and the scavenger as they continued their inside game of cat and mouse. Dragons laughed, others watched judgmentally, and a few stuck their hungry claws out, hoping to snag the scavenger in its panic.

Dragons, who were eager just to see a victor to the charade, roared out helpfully, "Its over there!" or "Get it! Claim it!" Claws pointed frantically, tracking the scavenger's movements with precision

"Catch it, you sand viper!" Winter hissed at Qibli

From there, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Before Qibli launch himself at the scavenger once more, Nightwing swooped out of, seemingly nowhere, and snatched the scavenger up in her claws, whispering to it.

She stared at it silently for a moment, most likely sizing it up, Winter guessed. The dragons around them quieted at the victor. Winter seethed, allowing brisk frostbreath to float in the air between them, and the Nightwing finally looked up at him. Recognition - and something more - reflected in her cool eyes.

"You have ten seconds to give me back my scavenger before I slice your face off." he threatened

She froze, silent for a moment, turning her gaze downward.

"Five seconds," Winter counted

"No." said the Nightwing timidly, returning her gaze to him

Winter narrowed his eyes at her, clawing the ground agitatedly, "That is my scavenger," he argued, baffled by her defiance. "My idiot clawmate let it out, but it is mine, and I did not bring it all the way here to see it eaten by a lying, smoke breathing Nightwing." he huffed with a sense of finality

"Yeah!" a deep voice from the crowd shouted, "I saw him and his Sandwing boyfriend earlier carrying it around! That is their rightful dinner!" said the owner of the voice, a proud, but ultimately unhelpful Mudwing

The Nightwing glanced at Winter curiously and Winter felt his ears warm slightly under her gaze,

"We are not -!"

The Nightwing seemed to be looking through him and he shivered.

Why is she looking at me like that? Nightwings can't read minds anymore, so why do I feel like shes looking right into my head?

Suddenly, the Nightwing flinched, before Winter could question it, Qibli came foward shoving his way through the wall of dragons, he opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, he was cut off by a warm golden Sandwing who had flown into the cave and was now hovering above them worriedly at the sight of a potential fight.

Sunny, the peculiar Sandwing looked down at them in alarm, "Woah!" she cried, forming a gap in the crowd beside the arguing dragons, "Lets calm down, alright? I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding." she pleaded.

Winter snorted and rolled his eyes. She was not very authoritative, and she seemed unsure of herself.

"Which dragon does this little guy belong to?" she asked, sweeping her eyes between the Nightwing, Winter, and Qibli

"Me!" stormed Winter, "And she's trying to eat it! If she puts her teeth anywhere near it, she WILL be losing them!"

"What? I wasn't going to eat him!" blurted the Nightwing frantically, "I didn't want anyone to eat him! I - I was afraid you were going to! Nobody can eat him." she insisted

"What?! I would never! That is exactly how I feel about it, too." insisted urgently, "It's my pet!"

Winter felt Qibli's gaze examining him curiously.

"Great." he concluded, "Weird, but still great."

Sunny beamed, "Well, there you have it!"

The Nightwing reunited the now sticky scavenger with Winter, who still kept a glare frozen on her for simply existing as a Nightwing in his prescense

"I'm glad you're making friends, Moon." Sunny smiled at the Nightwing

I would never call us that, we will never be friends thought Winter bitterly as he acknowledged the new information about her name, *Moon*, he repeated mentally

The crowd began to disperse, and Winter dunked his pet into the water to wash the stickness off which resulted in a gasp each from Moon, an approaching Rainwing, and Sunny.

"No one would dare hurt my scavenger." muttered Winter to himself

"Right. Queen Glacier's nephew's pet scavenger." Qibli agreed

"Precisely." Winter nodded before shooting Qibli a suspicious look

"Listen, I've been thinking, what if your scavenger has some sort of disease or something? And that's why it's not eating?" Qibli theorized

Winter panicked, "That's not possible! I give it water and meat every day!"

"Do you cook it?" Moon asked timidly, Winter turned his ferocious gaze onto her, "I-I mean, scavengers usually prefer their meat cooked, is all." informed Moon, "Or fruit." she added

Winter look at his dripping wet pet scavenger, *He should eat anything I give him. He has no right to be picky.*

"How am I supposed to do that?" Winter challenged, knowing full well that as an Icewing, he could never produce the fire breath needed to cook the meat

"You can ask your new clawmate to help you! Thats the wonderful thing about them." Sunny piped in, gesturing to Qibli who smiled smugly

While Sunny talked to Winter, Moon and the Rainwing quickly snuck away, leaving just the two boys, Sunny, and an approaching Clay alone.

"Hey!" Clay greeted happily, looking around the buzzing cafeteria with bright interest "What's all the excitement about?"

"Oh, just a misunderstanding." Sunny explained, smiling friendlily at Clay as he turned his attention to Winter and Qibli who stood shufling quietly.

"Boys!" Clay exclaimed, slapping a wing on their backs "I am so proud that you two were able to put aside your differences so quickly! I heard what happened earlier and I just want you two to

know that I'm proud and support you." beamed the Mudwing

Winters heart spasmed painfully in response.

He froze in place, sending a glare so icy at Qibli, that the other could practically hear his furious roar: 'you better fix this NOW'. Qibli shivered slightly

"Clearly, there has been some sort of misunderstanding," Qibli started, stepping forward

"No need to be bashful, Qibli. I know that Sandwing purity is kind of a big deal in the Sand kingdom, but the war is over! It shouldn't matter what tribe the dragon you're dating is from. The other dragons will come to understand that soon enough." she assured fiercely, taking his talons in hers, "And I know my mother would be proud of you too!"

"Thanks, but we're not -" Qibli tried again, looking to Clay for assistance, only to be cut off by said dragon

"- Ready to go official? Or public?" Clay finished, "Thats completely fine. I understand. Just know that we're behind you when you do." he grinned, lifting his wing around Sunny

Qibli and Winter stared dumbfounded by the situation, and at how even they couldn't explain themselves to the teachers. At how they ended up at the bottom of this situation.

"Thanks." Qibli said at last, forcing a smile

"Anytime. Now go enjoy dinner, you two!" Clay prodded,

"You are the role models this school needs to get others to put their pasts behind them!" he called after them

Chapter 4 - Faking it for the Crowd

Preview:

"Come on!" Qibli insisted, following after him, "We could be the push these dragons need to open up to each other."

"No thanks. I'd rather fight in another war against these dragons than ever be in a relationship with you." Winter replied indignantly

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Qibli nodded at the smiling Mudwing as he and Winter stepped away. Winter immediately snapping,

"That fixed NOTHING - you fixed nothing! If anything, you just made it worse!" he lamented

"It seems like a lot of dragons want to see us together," Qibli observed thoughtfully

"Well, we can't stop them from believing in their own delusions." Winter grumbled as he shoved the scavenger back into its cage with a talon-full of blueberries to boot, "it'll stop once I get my room changed." Winter hoped

"Here's hoping." replied Qibli as he followed behind Winter to examine the live prey scurrying around the room

Mmm... no polar bears, thought Winter disappointedly surveying the selection, suddenly turning his keen, snow fallen eyes to meet Qibli's black shimmering ones.

Qibli cocked his head, "Yes?"

"Why are you still following me?" Winter asked suspiciously. Qibli raised his talons in protest

"I'm just looking at the prey, chill out." his eyes suddenly glimmering mischievously at his own pun

"You're hilarious." Winter replied dryly, a faint smile playing on his face, "You following me is probably not doing much to change the opinions of everyone in this school, though."

"I don't know, Winter..." Qibli cut in, "I really can't stop thinking about Clays words."

"Well, I can. And I have." came Winters curt reply

"I mean, he really thinks that by us being together..." Qibli continued, earning a scowl from Winter, to which he promptly clarified, "which we're not! But he seems to think that we could change the school for the better." he explained, scooting closer to Winter as dragons filed in around them to catch their own meals.

"And?" Winter replied, viciously stabbing an icy claw through a fox to kill it, "Whats your point?"

"I guess my point is, given the chance, wouldn't you want to make the school a better place?"

Winter nearly choked on a fox bone he'd begun to eat. He coughed and coughed, pushing Qibli away when he tried to help, "You better not be suggesting what I think you're suggesting." he warned, turning to face Qibli, disgustedly. Qiblis face lit in alarm.

"No, scorpions, no! We wouldn't date for real, but what if we just... let them keep thinking that we are?" he finished uneasily

"No way." Winter instantly shut down, sweeping his tail as he carried his prey away to sit at the stalactite where his sister was

"Come on!" Qibli insisted, following after him, "We could be the push these dragons need to open up to each other."

"No thanks. I'd rather fight in another war against these dragons than ever be in a relationship with you." Winter replied indignantly

"Ouch," came Qibli lightly, "but it's not doing us any real harm if

we're not REALLY dating, is it? Besides, I would guarantee your protection from other dragons in the school, so you can go ahead, and cause fights all day long if you wanted to. But uh, dont, really." Qibli continued sheepishly

Winter knew Qibli would most likely protect him anyway, regardless of whether they were dating or not, because that's just the kind of loyal dragon he was. Not that Winter needed any protecting, anyways. His title would cover that for him, but it wouldn't hurt to have a guaranteed powerful and well-liked ally by his side while he was here.

Either through his own annoyance and desperate desire to be left alone, or through his own rationale, Winter finally sighed and went, "Alright, alright. FINE! But I have a few rules: firstly, this is not real, and it never will be." he promised, "AND you will leave me alone at all possible times of the day. Just because we're dating in phrase, doesn't mean we need to actually ACT like we are."

"Well, it's going to be pretty hard to maintain our relationship image if I'm not allowed to even talk to you." Qibli pointed out, smirking

I hate when he's right. I hate that charming know-it-all smile of his that makes me want to -

"IT'S. NOT. REAL. So what does it matter?" Winter snarled, "Fine. How about you leave me alone during all mealtimes *at least.*

"Deal." Qibli agreed, extending his talon out for Winter to shake. Winter ignored it coolly and continued walking to Icicle, feeling more worried than he had moments before.

"See you soon, honey." Qibli called after him teasingly

"Winter looked over his shoulder and snorted, "Don't do pet names. It doesn't suit you."
But even as he said that, his snout twitched in a smile.

Chapter 5 - Icicle Knows

Preview:

"Brother, who is that Sandwing staring at us?"

Winter, after a moments delay, dragged his eyes away from his meal, already knowing who it was. Qibli noticed Winter looking straight at him. His reaction was immediate - he pretended to act like he was busy.

"My clawmate," he replied finally, "I met him a little while ago. I don't know what to think of him, but he isn't awful." Winter complimented nonchalantly so Icicle wouldn't suspect how significant the Sandwing was about to become in his life.

Winter approached Icicle and sat beside her on the stalactite. There was barely enough room for the two of them, but neither complained nor budged to accommodate, they just sat in tense close quarters.

Icicle nodded in greeting and the two Icewings found themselves fall into an uneasy but not unfamiliar silence as they ate. Out of nowhere, Icicle asked accusingly

"Brother, who is that Sandwing staring at us?"

Winter, after a moments delay, dragged his eyes away from his meal, already knowing who it was. Qibli noticed Winter looking straight at him. His reaction was immediate - he pretended to act like he was busy.

"My clawmate," he replied finally, "I met him a little while ago. I don't know what to think of him, but he isn't awful." Winter complimented nonchalantly so Icicle wouldn't suspect how

significant the Sandwing was about to become in his life.

His sister wrinkled her snout, "Sandwings are vile. I'm just glad that all I got stuck with is a boring Mudwing." she concluded, before adding as though she'd forgotten, "and a Skywing."

Winter nodded and acted like he was listening to her as other Icewings began to form in a group around their ledge. In reality, his eyes were absent-mindedly trained on Qibli.

Maybe QIBLI had Nightwing powers, for how else could he be infiltrating my mind like this? Winter mused to himself

Icicle had finished talking - realizing that her brother was not paying attention, she turned her own gaze onto the sea of dragons of all colors.

Winter watched as Qibli talked with a Rainwing dragonet they had seen with Moon earlier. The Rainwing held a piece of fruit to Qiblis face, and he took a step back with an intense cringe contorting his features. Winter smiled despite himself, wishing he could have heard THAT conversation.

Icicle eyed her brother and thought he was staring at the Rainwing instead of Qibli (though that wouldn't have been much better.) and felt herself brimming with a loathing for him and his unreadable thoughts. Finally, she stood, light reflecting from her pristine scales. She announced that she was returning to her cave.

"I'll come with you." Winter decided, also standing beside her. He did NOT want to be left alone in a place as unorganized and dysfunctional as this.

"Whatever," she huffed, already seeming exasperated with him, "Just don't expect me to humor your conversations."

Winter nodded and the pair of glamorous Icewings swept from the dining hall.

As they passed Qibli and the Rainwing, Qibli shot him a knowing wink and the Rainwing flushed a light pink at seeing Winter. This earned an amused nudge from Icicle and Winter rolled his eyes. He

couldn't imagine wearing his emotions like that constantly. He glanced away without any further acknowledgement.

When Icicle and he arrived at the hallway leading to their sleeping caves, Icicle glanced his way and casually asked, "Would you like to write to mother tonight? I can have a messenger here by tomorrow to deliver it."

"No..." Winter replied hesitantly, immediately knowing that his mother would be the opposite of thrilled to hear of his new acquaintances, "There's nothing to report on. It's about what you'd expect from a school built by 5 dragonets." but even as Winter said this, he knew that something was different than it had been yesterday before he arrived at Jade Mountain.

Icicle shrugged, squinting her eyes slightly at him. "Suit yourself."

Then the two royalty dragonets departed to their respective dorms with subtle nods.

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As Icicle continued down the hallway, her mind twisted in all sorts of hostile and scheming directions to satisfy her hidden ally - the ex-Skywing Queen.

She passed a group of scoffing dragons who stamped and argued loudly of their disapproval of inter-tribe relationships. Spitting linguistic venom at "that cursed ice-breathing prince" and his "scar-face".

Normally, Icicle wouldn't care to interfere. She agreed but didn't feel the need to boast about what should be common sense. It was inherent to know that by spoiling your tribe's purity was dishonorable. Didn't every dragon know that?

However, Icicle only knew of one "ice-breathing prince" at Jade Mountain and that was her brother, Winter.

She stopped and inquired flatly, "Queen Glaciers nephew is with someone? How repulsive."

Fortunately for Icicle, unlike her brother, she'd always been good at getting what she wanted from other dragons. Whether that be possessions or information. In this case being the latter, she was well-versed with the process of obtaining it fast and without any hiccups. This time would be no different.

Also, weirdly fortunately for her, the dragons did not recognize her as her as his sister or as Princess Icicle, making her far more approachable than normal.

"Yeah." one of the dragons said, getting ready to go on another tangent, "Seems like your kingdoms throne is as good as ruined, AGAIN. Seems to be becoming increasingly common with your Icewing princes. How can anyone trust their rulers when all they do is betray you?"

A smaller Sandwing piped in, "But the war is over, they aren't really enemies anymore, right? So what if they're dating? No one is a traitor."

The first dragon snapped his jaw at the smaller dragonet and droned slowly, as though he were explaining the obvious, "Of course it matters! Enemies are enemies, end of story. Once the first bit of blood is drawn, it scars tribes forever. Everyone knows that. It's even more ridiculous that he gets with some Sandwing the second he gets here! Bam! Just like that!" he growled, snapping his claws for emphasis. Smoke rose from his copper nostrils furiously, "I'm glad that he's not OUR prince. If Queen Scarlet saw that, he'd sooner be thrown off the peak of a mountain than be caught swooning over a dragon from a different tribe."

Icicle considered their words carefully, processing what she now knew versus what she already knew about Winter. In her mind, she evaluated each of the Sandwings at school.

Onyx? No, Winter would probably feel intimidated by her, though she fit the description perfectly.

It couldn't be this little Sandwing in front of her, she was far too young.

And the other two Sandwings stuck together for most of the time as far as Icicle could tell.

Which only left Qibli, his clawmate.

But Winter had seemed indifferent about him when he was talking about him. No mushy feelings there. But then, just WHO was he looking at during dinner?

That Rainwing! She had a eureka moment, thinking rapidly she concluded, She could have changed her scales to look like a Sandwings if she wanted to! Everyone knew that Rainwings scales changed in accordance with their feelings! She hadn't gotten a good look at her face, but it seemed plausible. Furthermore, if there was nothing going on, what was with her reaction?

Yes, this was the culprit. Not some Sand-eating Sandwing after all, but worse, a lazy Rainwing!

"Are we sure that it couldn't have been a Rainwing who changed their scales to look like a Sandwings?" Icicle asked confidently

The dragons shrugged. "Could have. All we know is that it sure wasn't another Icewing."

Icicle nodded, rattling her icy scales beautifully, "You're right. That's all the matters." And with a majestic swing of her tail, she continued walking to her cave knowing that whatever her brother was up to had to be stopped.

For the sake of the throne. For HER sake.

She eyed her pristine, sharp claws with contemplation. They could be sharper.

Chapter 6: A Morning Stroll

Preview:

"What is wrong with you?" asked the Icewing exasperatedly, "How am I supposed to even make it through one night with you when you act like this?"

"What?" Qibli asked, fluttering his eyes innocently, "I'm just trying to get to know my clawmate better. Besides, isn't that what this school is about? Getting to know each other?" he pointed out, of course being charmingly right

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Winter was in his cave, resting on a matted polar bear hide. By this point, he was joined by Qibli, who had finished his own dinner a while ago. Winter let out a sneeze suddenly, causing frost to float momentarily.

I wonder if someone is thinking about me, Winter mused disinterestedly

Probably mother or father, if anyone, he quickly realized, devoid of joy
Forget it. Stupid game.

"What, did you catch a cold?" Qibli commented distractedly. His face was comically pulled into an ever-wide grin from his spot on his patch of sand. The sound of rustling scroll parchment filled Winters unamused silence.

"I doubt it. Maybe it's from all the sand you've kicked up, which is now in my nose, by the way." Winter quipped back, "What are you reading anyway?"

Winter walked over and peered over Qilbi's shoulder who let out a rumbling laugh as Winters eyes widened.

"A scroll on proper Icewing care." answered Qibli, chuckling. Winter immediately snatched the scroll in one-fell swoop and gently smacked the side of Qibli's head with it, abashed.

"What is wrong with you?" Winter groaned exasperatedly, "How am I supposed to even make it through one night with you when you act like this?"

"What?" Qibli asked innocently, "I'm just trying to get to know my clawmate better. Besides, isn't that what this school is about? Getting to know each other?" he pointed out, of course being charmingly right

"Well, I don't want to get to know you." Winter grumbled, returning to his bed and resting his head on his claws.

"Well, I do." Qibli replied sincerely, forcing Winter to have to look away from his eyes due to their earnest intensity

"Goodnight." Winter bid declaratively, "Go read a scroll on Icewing greatness and think about that for a while."

Qibli snorted, "Okay, I will. Will there be a pop quiz on this?"

Winter smiled and just then their third clawmate came in settled in on his bed and the rest of the night was spent in peaceful silence.

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By the time morning rolled around (though it was barely morning by most dragon's standards), Qibli had woken up just as the third moon was starting to set in exchange for the sun to rise.

He had trained himself to do this for Thorn, as such he was awake and alert in moments and ready to get his day started, except.... he couldn't.

No reasonable dragon was awake at this hour, and he certainly didn't dare wake his two clawmates - especially Winter, who Qibli wasn't sure WOULDN'T claw his face off.

Qibli rustled impatiently, when would it be a reasonable time to get up? Ten minutes? Thirty?

He heard a familiar groaning after he fidgeted for the hundredth time. His ears perked up and he whispered to himself affectionately, "Does he not make any sounds other than groaning?"

"I can come over there and roar your ear off if you'd prefer." came the groggy, deep voice of Winter, rubbing his eyes.

As surprised as Qibli was that he'd actually woken Winter up with his little comment, he also felt a mixture of guilt and something else. His heart lurched and he focused too much on the sound of Winters barely awake voice that he'd forgotten to actually pay attention to what Winter said.

Which was weird.

Qibli felt his face flush with the realization of what he'd done.

It was an accident and nothing more.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted." Qibli tried to carry on casually, but failing, "Go back to sleep. The last thing the world needs is a sleep-deprived Winter."

"Now I can't." grumbled the Icewing quietly, "Are all Sandwings like this, or are you just exceptionally strange?"

"Wow, good morning to you too, sunshine." Qibli beamed in retaliation.

Winter scowled as his tail twitched slightly. He gently rose from his bed and walked out the cave opening.

Qibli hurried as quietly as he could behind him, eager to have someone else awake

"What are you doing?" questioned Winter as soon as they were outside

"Following you." gushed Qibli jokingly, "I know you want me to."

"Or maybe that's what YOU want." Winter retorted, stiffening as Qibli smiled disarmingly at him. Winter quickly looked away

"My, my. Playing hard to get, are we?" Qibli teased, "This isn't like you at all."

"Another word from you and you'll be getting another scar on that face of yours." threatened Winter, feeling his scales warm unusually

Qibli grinned proudly as he stretched his wings and walked to a wide window that led outside, "Someday you'll admit that you adore me."

"Keep dreaming. Where do you think you're going?" Winter asked approaching Qibli from behind. Qibli could feel his cool scales radiate from him and chill his naturally warm ones. It was a weird feeling, but not unpleasant. Qibli shuffled nervously.

What am I feeling? Nervous? Ansty? Ready to burst?

Winter, becoming impatient, decided to approach Qibli from his side so he could directly speak with him.

Qibli snapped out of his thoughts as he saw Winters face.

"Going for some air." Qibli finally answered flustered. He set his jaw firmly.

Winter stared in silence for a moment as though waiting for something else as Qibli shifted from talon to talon, eager to fly and clear his head.

I must be exhausted from yesterday. It was...a lot to take in, after all.

"Right. I just think it's weird how you're the one needing air when it's the heat from YOUR scales that made the air practically stifling in the first place." Winter told Qibli, sensing his discomfort and

taking a step back.

Too wrapped up in his own thoughts, Qibli simply rolled his eyes and snorted, a little harsher than he meant to, "Yes, yes. Then it's a good thing you'll finally have your own room soon, then. Save us both a headache."

Winter narrowed his eyes guardedly and Qibli instantly realized his mistake. Through clenched teeth, Winter said,

"Lucky me."

Qibli stared for a moment longer, regretting upsetting the Icewing, but ultimately deciding to spread his wings and launch off. It was a moment of weakness he hadn't expect to show around the Icewing.

Winter, in the meanwhile, let out a sigh. Too confused with his own feelings, too. He had wanted to be alone since the moment he'd arrived at Jade Mountain, but knew he'd be dreadfully board.

Dreadfully bored without the quick wit and charm of his Sandwing companion.

Winter decided that while Qibli was gone, it would be in his best interest to become better acquainted with the layout of the school.

Qibli had been insufferable, seeming to have already memorized and understand the layout of the school within hours of their first day. It wasn't fair. Winter felt like he needed to catch up as to not rely too much on another dragon.

It wasn't the Icewing way. And he couldn't go soft while he was here.

Chapter 7: A Chat with the Moon

Preview:

Moon looked up at Winter with kindness and empathy written on her face.

"I think it's okay to be honest with yourself and admit your feelings." she offered cryptically

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Winter paced the corridors slowly, taking in all the decorations strewn around. It was like a mosaic of all the different tribes combined, and Winter found himself wondering what decorations were inspired from what tribe.

Focus. He snapped himself back to attention

He took his time carefully examining the layout of the school as quietly as he could. he did not want to interact with any other dragons at this hour - or ever, just in general.

Occasionally, he threw a glance over his shoulder, half expecting to see Qibli grinning at him reassuringly, but he was betrayed every time he looked.

As Winter finally rounded the corner back to the sleeping caves, he was too impatient and tired to wait for his companion to return. He was just about to enter his cave when he nearly ran into a shadowy figure who leapt nearly out of their skin.

Instantly, Winter assumed a typical Icewing battle formation, and bared his teeth, ready for a fight. Until he heard a voice panicky squeak,

"Oh! I'm sorry, um..., it's just me, Moon, I mean." and Moon stepped out into the early sunlight, scales glimmering and all.

Winter was surprised by just how many beautiful and colorful undertones Nightwing scales actually had. Moons were intricate dark green and blues. They shone nearly as pretty in the light as an Icewings.

Or a Sandwings, said a little voice in Winters head before he could snuff it out.

Oh, wonderful. I'm sure mother would like to hear about this. Why don't you just propose to the Sandwing if you think his scales are so nice? Huh? Get a grip. he internally scolded himself

Once again, he caught Moon giving him a sympathetic look like she was almost seeing right through him and into his core. He scowled at her. He would receive no pity from a Nightwing.

"What are you doing awake?" Spat Winter accusingly, "Sneaking off somewhere? Going to some secret Nightwing club to dream up MORE devious lies to tell the world?"

Moon flinched like he'd just touched her with one of his razor-sharp talons, he momentarily felt bad, she had, after all, just saved his scavenger yesterday. She straightened herself out boldly,

"I couldn't sleep." came her reply in barely above a whisper. She then looked around him, as though she were searching for something. Or someone.

"Is Qibli not with you?" she asked curiously

"No." Winter bit back, "We're not ALWAYS together."

Not able to stop himself, he added indignantly, "And we're not even really dating. Why?"

Moon nodded her head understandingly

"No reason. I was just curious, I suppose. I just haven't seen you without him is all." she explained honestly and impartially

Winter huffed, "Well if he had it his way I wouldn't."

Silence fell between the two of them and Winter noticed how un-Nightwingly Moon was. She wasn't pompous or as full of herself like most other Nightwings. She was sincere, and maybe she wasn't ALL bad. Winter cringed at this thought. No, she probably was just as bad, if not worse, but better at hiding it.

Moon ducked her head shamefully. Winter looked curiously at her, but before he could question her, she asked,

"How's your scavenger? Is he okay? Did you give him a name?"

Suddenly Winter found himself eager to spill all the details he could to another rare scavenger enthusiast, but he composed himself,

"Bandit is fine, yes." Winter told her before adding reluctantly, "And I've been feeding him blueberries and he seems to like them."

Moon gave him a mystic smile and Winter felt embarrassed that he had accepted advice from a Nightwing, but he knew that Bandit was happier with her suggestions.

"And I've kept Qibli away from Bandit's cage ever since. Clearly, some dragons are as unintelligent as they look. I can't have Bandit escaping again." Winter elaborated, secretly hoping to receive more scavenger tips

Moons smile faltered slightly, "I don't think Qibli meant to let the scavenger escape." she said gently

"Yeah, well he did." Winter gruffed, "And now every dragon and their niece want to eat my pet."

"Don't be so hard on him. You know he wouldn't intentionally anger you by doing something like that."

"Yes?" Winter sputtered, "He would? He does it all the time for his own amusement!" Winter argued, though he wasn't sure what he was looking for Moon to say. Maybe something to convince him that he needed to cut ties with the Sandwing, even though the thought of doing so burned inside of Winter painfully, a dull thud

panged in his chest.

Moon hesitated, choosing her next words carefully, for only she understood how badly Qibli wanted to impress Winter constantly,

"I think that's just his way of showing affection." she settled on finally, hoping she hadn't given away too much of Qiblis private thoughts.

Winters eyes widened. Of course, he knew that Qibli wasn't ever trying to push Winter away. He didn't understand why he was even arguing with Moon about it. But suddenly, hearing what he had secretly hoped all along about Qibli made Winters heart thaw.

Whatever you're feeling for him right now is...VILE, Winter heard his father say in his head sternly.

But...his father wasn't here. He couldn't decide who Winter kept in company with. Even if he could, it wouldn't be worth leaving Qibli for.

Winter felt lucky that mind-readers weren't around anymore to read his thoughts and expose what he really thought of the Sandwing.

Moons expression was surprised for a moment before she forced it back to neutral

Somehow though, he couldn't fully convince himself that there were no more mind-readers out there, but he didn't have time to think about it with his newfound confusing feelings.

Moon looked up at Winter with kindness and empathy written on her face.

"I think it's okay to be honest with yourself and admit your feelings." she offered cryptically

Winter took a step towards her, "What is that supposed to -?"

"Hey, guys." Greeted a familiar gruff voice as footsteps echoed down the hallway.

At seeing Winter leering over Moon, the footsteps quickened and

Qibli was beside Winter at once.

Upon seeing Moon, he shot her a wry grin,

"Hello again! I'm Qibli." He said warmly, "Winters 'idiot clawmate' from yesterday. Glad we get to finally meet."

Moon smiled and giggled slightly. It was obvious that she was much more comfortable around him than Winter. Reasonable.

Normally Winter would roll his eyes and have a retort ready for one of Qiblis remarks, but he had none, his mind was too busy yelling and swirling from his thoughts.

"Anyway." Qibli continued, looking at Winter sideways briefly, "I want to apologize for anything hes said to you while I was gone. I didn't think there'd be anyone else awake for him to threaten at this hour." he joked

"I wish you were still gone. I can take care of myself." grumbled Winter half-heartedly

"Hey, don't speak that way to your boyfriend." Qibli swatted Winters wing playfully, earning a grunt. It seemed like whatever was bothering Qibli earlier was fine now. Winter was thankful. It made him feel weird knowing that Qibli was privately struggling, too.

"It's alright! He and I were just talking for a few minutes." Moon smiled politely, glancing at Winter at the 'boyfriend' remark, wanting to see if his expression shifted in the slightest.

Well, he wasn't going to let it to.

"Wow! He actually had a conversation with you without threatening you?" Qibli said with mock surprise, hoping for a bigger reaction from Winter.

"Well... I didn't say that." Moon replied softly

Winter, at least, had the distinct feeling that she was joking, but he couldn't be sure. But apparently Qibli was, and a low laugh

reverberated from deep in his chest. Winter found even himself smiling and rolling his eyes from his contagious laughter.

From beside Qibli, Moon stared meaningfully at Winter, and he heard her voice ring in his head, *it's okay to be honest with youself.*

And he actually considered it, this time for longer than 2 seconds.

What he felt? He NEVER thought about what he felt, only what he had to do.

Qibli squinted his eyes and examined the sun for a moment.

"I'd bet anything that most dragons will be getting up pretty soon."

Just then, exiting from the cave was an eyesore - a bright pink and yellow Rainwing who had a groggy smile permanently etched into her features. it was the one who'd Winter had seen yesterday while with Icicle.

"Moon! You didn't tell me that you were awake and totally having a secret party in the hallway!" she yawned enthusiastically

"Sorry. I didn't want to wake you." she replied, "but I want you to meet someone now that you're here." Moon nodded at Winter

"Winter, this is Kinkajou. Kinkajou, Winter." she introduced, nodding between them respectively

Kinkajous' breath hitched as she looked at Winter and he found himself squirm slightly under he bewildered gaze

Don't squirm! he ordered himself, *Princes don't squirm! Not for Rainwings! Or anyone!* he reminded himself as he forced himself to stand regally

"Kinkajou says that they're announcing Winglets today." Moon conversed, looking towards Kinkajou for reinforcement

Kinkajou's gaze instantly snapped away from Winter.

"Yeah! I really hope that we're all in the same Winglet! Can you

imagine? That would be, like, probably the best thing ever!" she exclaimed loudly

Kinkajou's ruckus resulted in several groans as other dragons began waking up irritably from their caves.

Moon looked around guiltily as 3 bongs vibrated against the cave walls. Kinkajou flapped her wings excitedly.

"Oh! They must have them written on the board already! Come on, Moon!" and just as fast as she arrived, Kinkajou whisked Moon away.

Qibli turned to Winter a moment later.

"Ready to go, partner?"

"If I hear one more joke from you in the next two hours, I will be personally punish you." Winter warned smugly

"My personal record is one. I can't help it!" Qibli protested, "I know how much you love them." Qibli said as he walked to check the board with the Winglet listings

Secretly, Winter hoped that he was in the Sandwings Winglet, although he was only just starting to admit to himself why.

Chapter 8: Small Milestones

Preview:

Dragons passed them scowling at their accidental display of affection while others whistled. Some dragons slapped Qibli on the back brazenly.

In addition, many dragons grouched about their alleged relationship.

Qibli rested his head on Winter's shoulder boldly, causing Winter's breath to hitch from the sudden closeness.

"Sorry about this," Qibli whispered, "They just need to get used to the sight."

As Qibli and Winter approached the board, Qibli peered up and read the Winglets out loud until they finally reached theirs.

"Let's see... looks like we're in the Jade Winglet together! With Carnelian, Kinkajou, our roommate Turtle, and Moon. We know most of these guys! Talk about lucky placement." Qibli beamed delightedly, starting to sound to Winter an awful lot like Kinkajou. "And we'll even be with Moon so you can nerd out and talk about all things scavenger with her, too." he added thoughtfully

"It was only ONE time." Winter quipped rolling his eyes, debating on whether he should tell Qibli about the suspicious feelings he'd be having about Moon. Would he believe him? He didn't want to sound crazy if he was wrong, but he was almost certain of his theory.

He stared at the ground for a moment, weighing his options.

But what if she really was a mind reader, could it be possible?

"Two times, actually." Qibli corrected formally, clearly mocking

Winter from the manner he was speaking.

Winter huffed affectionately, knowing that Qibli was right, and that Winter should just let this one go. What he couldn't let go of, however, were his suspicions of Moon. Winter really wanted to share his concerns with Qibli, knowing that if there was anything unusual about her, Qibli would be the first to sniff it out.

But he didn't want Qibli to assume this was just Winter overreacting because she was a Nightwing. Though in Winters eyes, that was impossible. He believed that you could never be too sure.

Winter shifted from talon to talon silently as they began walking to class, weighing his options. Finally, he stuck a pointed, silver wing out abruptly in front of Qibli and told him to stop.

"Hey. Hold on, there's something I have to say."

His heart thumped nervously, Would Qibli think he's out of his mind? Would he think of Winter as a vengeful conspirator and be uncomfortable around him? Like Icicle or his parents did when Winter had shared theories with them?

And why did the thought of that worry him more than the possibility of a Nightwing mind reader?

Instantly, Qiblis eyes flooded with concern and care, and Winter briefly wondered how he ever could have worried about Qibli abandoning him.

"You alright?" he asked, warmth shining from his eyes

"Listen, have you noticed anything strange about Moon?" Winter asked vaguely, giving himself enough room to back out from the conversation if needed

Qibli considered for a moment as he thought. "No, not anything in particular. Is something up?" he answered, leaning down to level with Winter, peering into his eyes searchingly.

Winter looked away, coughing awkwardly from the sudden close contact.

"Doesn't it seem like she always knows what you're thinking?" Winter attempted, earning an amused arched brow from Qibli

"Well, maybe she's just good at reading the room, something that Icewings maybe wouldn't know about." he grinned brushing his wing against Winters, trying to reassure him although he was confused.

"I'm serious!" Winter complained as he furrowed his brows in annoyance, but even he was fighting back a smile from Qiblis natural charisma.

"Alright," Qibli replied, leaning away, "I guess that I've noticed that she's pretty good at reading dragons, yeah."

"But don't you think almost a little *too* good?" Winter asked exasperated with himself. He lowered his voice and it suddenly clicked in Qiblis head what he was implying.

"But Winter, they told us that there hasn't been..." Qibli looked around before continuing, "a mind reader... in centuries."

"Well, maybe they're wrong." Winter replied stoutly, "I can't prove anything yet, but I just wanted to see if you've noticed anything. Because I -" *Because I what? Because I trust your judgement? I can't say that. Not yet.*

"But clearly you haven't." Winter flushed, embarrassed that he'd said anything at all.

Qibli shot Winter a kind smile, "I'll keep an eye on her if you really think she's...you know." he reassured him

Winters heart warmed at Qibli taking his concerns seriously. He felt that between him and Qibli's inquisitive nature they'd figure out whatever was going on.

Winter found himself staring appreciatively at Qibli for a beat longer than he'd meant to, wrapped up in his own thoughts. And he noticed that the two of them were closer than they had been moments before, about the distance of a young dragonet's wingspan apart, with Winter tail wrapped unusually dotingly around Qibli's.

Dragons passed them scowling at their accidental display of affection while others whistled. Some dragons slapped Qibli on the back brazenly.

In addition, many dragons grouched about their alleged relationship.

Qibli rested his head on Winter's shoulder boldly, causing Winter's breath to hitch from the sudden closeness.

"Sorry about this," Qibli whispered, "They just need to get used to the sight."

Winter flushed and Qibli grinned fondly. Winter wasn't sure how they had managed to entwine themselves like this, but he couldn't pull away. He wrapped a shaky, cold wing around Qibli.

After a moment Qibli spoke,

"Uh, Winter?"

"What?"

"I'd love to stay like this and all, but we're a little busy today." Qibli smirked and winked as Winter quickly pulled away, feeling colder than normal where his scales had been brushing Qiblis.

"Right. Sorry." Winter replied dazed as the final bong sounded throughout the halls. He sighed and shuddered, "Don't tell me we have that Seawings class first, she'll yell at us for being late." Winter grumbled

Winter temporarily wished that he had the forgiving and timid Sunny or Clay's class first. He had a feeling his ears were going to ache a lot more by the time Tsunami's lesson was over .

"Tsunami? Yeah, we do. And you're right," Qibli agreed, speeding past Winter and whipping around grinning, "she'll never let us live this down."

Winter and Qibli rushed through the hallways, their wingtips brushing against the smooth and deliberate walls of the cave, and

occasionally, each other's. Starflight poked his head out of the library, startled, and Winter felt a rushing sensation of freedom and gratification as the two of them ran down the halls.

Winter and Qibli finally arrived last to their Winglet meeting. Tsunami sat in front of an unfinished arched of dragons, eyeing the two late dragons sternly. She opened her mouth to snarl, but then thought better of it, thankfully.

"You're late." she snapped

Qibli's ears splayed with slight shame, "We got caught up."

Tsunami sighed aggravatedly as she rubbed the bridge of her nose with one talon. "Don't make a habit of it."

"It's not like we missed anything, anyway." Winter began to protest

"Wouldn't dream of it." Qibli said at the exact same time

Qibli shot him an amused look and motioned for Winter to take a seat beside Turtle. Once he did, Qibli sat closely between him and Moon. Moon brightened and waved shyly at him.

Tsunami walked to the corner of the cave to retrieve something, and as she did the dragonets in the room began to rapidly whisper.

Winter zoned out as Qibli chattered casually with the other members. Winter eventually found himself locking eyes with Moon. Her eyes twinkled with curiosity as she smiled placidly.

She always looks like she's deep in thought. Winter observed casually as he began to subtly scrutinize her. His tail lashed with thought and Qibli wrapped the crook of his comfortably warm wing around Winter suddenly, to Winter's alarm and pleasure.

Qibli shielded the two of them slightly and whispered, "Maybe now we can figure her out. What should I ask her?"

Winter flushed from admiration, and grinned, "Nothing, I'll take care of this."

Chapter 9 - Icewing Investigators

Preview:

Qibli shot him a surprised smile, his eyebrows raised high.

"So, you DO like me."

Winter coughed violently on the breath he'd just taken, gripping his snout closed.

"What fantasy are you having now?"

Chattering halted as Tsunami returned, and her through her presence alone, she commanded the room to be silent.

Silent enough for Winter to hear the calm breaths Qibli took. They helped to calm his own nerves, too.

Tsunami suggested they began by familiarizing themselves all with one another, and she began by introducing herself as the Head of school. Afterwords, conversation bounced around the room as every dragon spoke about themselves.

Qibli spoke passionately about his course of learning and his intentions to return to Queen Thorn as fast as he could. Winter and he enjoyed a brief and light-hearted banter when a smirking Qibli informed the group how despite not being Queen Thorns nephew, he was still important in protecting her throne.

Tsunami rolled her eyes, no doubt thinking how clearly of a mistake it was to put the two of them together.

As Umber, a social Mudwing, introduced himself, Qibli and Winter ignored his jealous glances and whispered among themselves.

"Tsunami is head of school." Qibli whispered sing-song-like, with obvious implications for Winter to request his long-awaited room change.

Winter sat up slightly. Qibli was (unsurprisingly) right. Tsunami was the dragon he'd been looking for. The dragon Winter believed would finally put an end to his 'problem'.

But Winter couldn't muster up the anger and resolute feeling he'd had yesterday.

Even with Tsunami's full attention on him as Winter introduced himself, he said what he deemed necessary and moved on, allowing the conversation once more to be dominated by the rambunctious Seawing.

Qibli shot him a surprised smile, his eyebrows raised high.

"So, you DO like me."

Winter coughed violently on the breath he'd just taken, gripping his snout closed.

WHAT?

The rest of the dragons glanced at him suspiciously. Except Qibli who'd just barely hid his sly and mischievous expression.

How does he know? What does he think?

"What?" Winter snapped to the staring dragons,"Can't a dragon cough anymore?"

Tsunami shrugged and continued her speech.

Internally, Winter panicked and struggled to find a more adequate response for Qibli.

"What fantasy are you having now?" Winter asked quietly to Qibli, shooting him a strict side-glance.

Qibli looked taken aback Winter's harsh reaction, "I couldn't help

but notice how you just had the perfect opening to ask for a room change, and you didn't take it." he justified smugly

Winter shut his eyes and took a deep breath. It was only him who had interpreted Qibli's words to mean something more. Strangely, he was more disappointed than he thought he'd be. Would he have been happy if Qibli had said he wanted to end their fake-dating scheme and begin ACTUALLY dating?

Winter turned back to Qibli, "It wouldn't have changed anything if I did. You'd still find a way to bother me."

"True."

Winter chuckled quietly, amused by his own thoughts.

Thank the moon's that no one except me will ever know how willing I had been to give up a potential private suite... all for some boy I'd just met, no less. He sighed, grateful that none of his family would ever need to know.

But maybe some other dragon here would. Maybe they were already listening.

He shot a sharp glance in Moons direction, immediately, she tensed up. She refused to meet his gaze.

During a break in the conversation, Winter suddenly chimed in, "I want to talk about Nightwing powers,"

He kept his gaze level with Moons, who had since turned to face him as he spoke. She clearly looked uncomfortable, wearing the same furrowed brow and perceptive expression she always did, but with slightly more panic.

"Oh, real subtle." Qibli quipped, though even he seemed abnormally interested to hear the thought-provoking discussion that was guaranteed to follow Winter's ambitious statement.

Alright, Moon. Let's see what you've got. Winter thought triumphantly.

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On the other side of Jade Mountain sat another glamorous Icewing who couldn't have suspicious Nightwing powers any further from her mind. She was troubled with her own set of problems and priorities, urging her to unravel and do something about her brother's mystery affair.

Icicle groaned as she exhaustedly rubbed her eyes. Despite her current state, she forced herself into perfect, suitable posture fitting for a future queen. Even if she didn't currently feel like one.

She had hardly the restful night. Between her brother's newfound exotic love interest and Queen Scarlet's demands, murder planning wasn't easy. Especially with an impatient and fickle dragon such as the ex-Skywing Queen, who'd been haunting her dreams for days now and was expecting results soon.

Icicle was antsy to get out from beneath her talons before Scarlet could change her mind or back out from their deal about returning Hailstorm.

Icicle just wanted her older brother back.

Winter, however? If he was slipping this low on only his second day away from the Ice Kingdom, he was clearly a lost cause. Too impressionable and unfit for royalty, more than she'd ever could have imagined.

But if she hurried, there would still be a chance to save him. All Icicle would need to do is simply eliminate the bad influence in his life to allow him to snap back to.

If he was already destined to be a pathetic prince, the least he could do was not drag her down with him.

In her dreams, Icicle had promised Scarlet that killing the Prophecy Dragonets would be a priority, ensuring that at least one would be killed by the end of her first week at Jade Mountain - as per their deal.

However, privately to herself, during the day Icicle betrayed those thoughts, believing that the fate of the royal family lineage was more important than saving what was left of Scarlet's stolen throne.

Besides, any queen who'd let herself be overtaken in such a short period of time is no queen at all, Icicle greedily thought, scratching a claw lightly on the rough cave floor.

Not like how I'll be when Im Queen, though.

Icicle sat contemplatively while discussion sparked around the Gold Winglet.

How could she get rid of that pesky and boisterous Rainwing she suspected her brother was seeing? She obviously couldn't use her frost breath on her - the Rainwing had deadly venom constantly dripping down from her fangs, just waiting to tear through Icicle in an instant. Icicle shuddered. That would be a nightmare.

It's not fair, Icicle grumbled, touching her face delicately as though to ensure it was still as pristine and intact as it had been moments before, *what does the laziest tribe need such a deadly weapon for? Imagine what the Icewings could do with such a power!* She quickly cleared that jealousy up and locked the thought away neatly and calmly. Being an Icewing still outweighed any positives of being a Rainwing.

They can't handle cold, Icicle rationed, *they look ridiculous and undignified. They don't have an official army... The list went on*

Icicle would need to trick Kinkajou. Catch her off-guard and maybe snap her neck. Maybe when she was sleeping?

A Mudwing eyed Icicle warily from across the room and Icicle sneered at her.

What's her issue? Icicle briefly wondered, rising and high tailing it out of the cave as soon as the loud, brass bong was heard.

Clay called after them, wishing them luck in the rest of their classes.

Icicle rolled her eyes. Clay was a fool to be so hopeful about the

success of his school.

Icicle was confident that by the time she was done with the school, all that would remain would be the burnt ashes containing nothing but the school's failed memory - a reminder that some tribes truly were just better than others.

Maybe sooner than anyone would expect. But first, she needed more planning and information.

She spotted something white glimmer at the corners of her eye, and she turned to narrowly miss her brother walking into her. They were nearly snout to snout.

His Sandwing clawmate trailed behind him, talking to to an unsightly Nightwing and Winter's Rainwing girlfriend.

Gotcha.

Chapter 10 - Peril

Preview:

Is she going to lunge at us? Winter briefly fretted, before following it up with a certainty. *No, she wouldn't. Not now. Not unless she has a death wish.*

Qibli suddenly grabbed him and jerked him backward.

"And it's alright for YOU to do stupid things?" he fumed, yelling in his ear

"Yes!" Winter snapped, wringing himself free from the Sandwings grasp. "Maybe when you're a queen's nephew you can too!"

"That doesn't mean anything!" Qibli flared, "You're not invincible! If she even brushes you with a single claw, you're dead! Did that even occur to you?!"

"Icicle?" her brother asked, startled, "I almost ran into you, why are you standing in the middle of the hallway?" he huffed annoyedly, taking a large step away from her.

Icicle tipped her chin up, "Then watch where you're going," she snapped, before quickly adding, "I came to walk with you to your next class."

"Why?" Winter asked suspiciously, ruffling his wings defensively

Ah. He thinks I want to prove something to him. And maybe I do. Her snout curled upward with realization

"I just want to walk with you, can't I do that? Or are you planning on walking with your girlfriend?" she spat haughtily, hoping to see him squirm.

Instead, he looked confused. Behind him, the Sandwing struggled to hold back a roar of laughter. Winter sent Icicle a sharp look.

"What? Don't be weird." he snapped

"Don't bother lying to me, Winter." she exclaimed, "Every dragon in the school has heard by now of your little affair with the Rainwing."

"Were you hit in the head?! Or have you just lost your mind?" Winter roared incredulously, "You must have if you think that I'm seeing a Rainwing!"

"This is a little awkward." The Sandwing chuckled sheepishly, swiftly dodging a swat from Winter

"You." he said through gritted teeth, pointing with one wing down the hallway "Out."

Qibli rolled his eyes. "If that's what your majesty wants, then that's what his majesty gets." he replied cheekily, leaving the two glowering Icewings alone.

"As for you," Winter continued, turning back to Icicle, "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, brother, it must be so frustrating to know that you've underestimated me more than you thought." Icicle smirked knowingly and began walking, leaving Winter to catch up behind her.

Even though she wasn't looking at Winter, she could tell he was rolling his eyes.

"You're going to have to be a little more specific than that."

Icicle grinned showing all her sharp and perfectly untainted white teeth,

"You didn't think I would find out? It was all incredibly obvious: a scarred yellow dragon? That practically just screams your Rainwing girlfriend. She's ALWAYS yellow with her stupid mushy feelings. She fits perfectly. It wasn't hard to figure out the rest, really." she

elaborated triumphantly

Winters jaw opened in apparent shock and outrage. "Are you kidding?!"

"I'm getting a little tired of you referring to her as my girlfriend! Because obviously you must be delusional if you think she is." Winter seethed, "I just met her THIS morning."

"Oh, brother" Icicle clicked her tongue condescendingly, "Getting angry won't solve anything."

"Listen, I want to help you get out of that relationship as much as I'm sure you do, deep down...somewhere. It's quite embarrassing, really. Which leaves only the question of how we are gonna do this. The easy way or the hard way?" She held up her recently sharpened talons threateningly.

"And let me give you a hint: one method is a significantly easy decision for me to make."

Winter growled at her, wings flaring to their full length angrily, "Do NOT threaten me. Especially when you have absolutely no idea what you're talking about! Whatever, I'm leaving -"

He was interrupted by nearby chaos as hordes of dragons ran back down the hall back past them. Stumbled and overlaying voices yelled and filled the air agitatedly:

"....Skywing! Queen Scarlet's here, finally to kill us all! She wants revenge!"

Winter and Icicle shot each other a confused countenance, and they hurried down the hall, in hope of eavesdropping.

It turned out, at the entrance of the cave stood a flame orange Skywing with unusual soul-tearing blue eyes. And if Icicle squinted at her, she could see smoke rising from his scales.

Something of recognition and urgency flashed across Winters face, he looked repulsed.

They had heard rumors and horror-tales about the dragon and her blood-thirsty reputation from the Icewing refugees that had barely escaped with their lives from the Skywing arena.

That's not Scarlet... it's even worse! A monster! It's Peril!

Winter began rapidly scanning the surrounding dragons intentionally, ignoring Icicle. Skipping right to a group consisting of two bedraggled Nightwings, his Rainwing and Sandwing clawmate.

Icicle watched on, curiously.

He's so helpless, Icicle thought bitterly.

"Hey, snowbrain, your girlfriend is right there. Better watch out - I hear that some Skywings absolutely just hate Rainwings right now." she remarked, enjoying the power she now held over him.

"Don't care. I kind of absolutely just hate YOU right now, too." Winter replied distractedly, keeping a watchful eye on Peril, his tail lashing dangerously.

Suddenly and wordlessly, Winter pushed a way through the crowd of dragons so he could reach his winglet. He spoke with the Sandwing who wore an unusual grave mask of worried intrigue that mirrored most of the other dragons' expressions surrounding him. The expression made him look years older and seemed well-worn on his face. Winter seemed more antsy at seeing this, clenching and unclenching his talons.

Winter yelled to them, "Don't you all understand? If she's here, Scarlet is probably right behind her!"

"Queen Scarlet is here?!" Starflight, the Nightwing librarian cried, flaring his wings and instantly freezing in a rigid and uncomfortable pose.

"No! It's just Peril, not Scarlet." the other Nightwing amended reassuringly, though that didn't seem to improve his mood much more, either.

"Stay here." Winter ordered his winglet, "Don't do anything stupid -

especially YOU." he glared at the young Nightwing who wrapped a protective wing around Starflight.

"What would I do anyway?" she protested, "She has fire-scales."

At this, Winter began marching past the crowd and right up to the fiery dragon herself. Qibli stamped his talon and shouted something incomprehensible after him.

Idiot! What does he think he's doing? He's going to die! Icicle realized with streaks of adrenaline mixing with jolts of anger and delight. She eyed Winter, while still maintaining a sharp glower on Peril.

Peril's eyes were locked heart sickeningly on a delighted Clay, who stood beside her with a wide, goofy smile plastered on his face. He approached her incautiously and made to embrace her. Icicle didn't even flinch despite expecting Clay to instantly start screaming in agony and burning. She was, however, surprised to see when he hadn't a moment later, and instead pulled away with nothing to show but a few blisters.

"Peril!" Clay cried happily, "We're so happy you're here!"

"Happy to be here." Peril replied with a shy smile, tucking her tail in closely and clawing at the ground

The indignant mumblings of Tsunami were heard, but Clay ignored her.

"Come on, Sunny and I will show you to your room! You're going to love it here, I know it."

"Excuse me?" Winter barked defyingly, "She can't stay here! In case you've all forgotten, this is a literal murderer! Do you even know how many Icewing's this dragon has slain?"

Temporarily putting aside her hostile feelings for Winter, Icicle piped in to support her brother. He, oddly enough, voiced a valid and widely shared consensus.

"And she may still be working for Scarlet." Icicle agreed

Not that she's one to talk

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"How is anything she's done forgivable?" Winter challenged. A moment later, he cringed as though he'd just had an unfavorable epiphany. He quickly shook his head, as though if he shook hard enough, he might shake the thought out.

How is anything that I've done forgivable? An image of his captured brother crossed his mind. *But I'm not a murderer...not like she is.*

"She massacred dragons while they were chained up, which is monstrous behavior. How can we trust her when even Queen Ruby hasn't pardoned her!" he argued, less spiritedly

Peril shrunk in her place, her blue eyes glittering with an unhidden desire for malevolent violence.

Is she going to lunge at us? Winter briefly fretted, before following it up with a certainty. *No, she wouldn't. Not now. Not unless she has a death wish.*

Qibli suddenly grabbed him and jerked him backward.

"And it's alright for YOU to do stupid things?" he fumed, yelling in his ear

"Yes!" Winter snapped, wringing himself free from the Sandwings grasp. "Maybe when you're a queen's nephew you can too!"

Though Winter never admitted this aloud, he was fighting for Peril's banishment on behalf of dragons LIKE Qibli. Couldn't he see that? Couldn't he see how invaluable he is? And what if Peril relapsed into her murderer-psyche? There's so much risk involved, especially if she's allowed to remain at the school with Winter on her 'to kill brutally and mercilessly' list.

"That doesn't mean anything!" Qibli flared, "You're not invincible! If she even brushes you with a single claw, you're dead! Did that even occur to you?!"

Winter ignored him and threw a knowing look at Icicle, to which she immediately understood.

"I'll inform Queen Glacier." she nodded seriously

Another gong rang through the halls signifying that it was time for class. Which meant the joint Jade-Gold winglet history lesson.

"Do you just have a natural habit of making enemies?" Qibli lamented, uncharacteristically forlorn. He rubbed at his eyes with unbridled exasperation.

Winter felt his previous anger quell, as though his fire had been extinguished by a bucket of cool, welcoming water.

Then you must be my necessary opposite, Winter thought admiringly, suddenly feeling repentant for being the source of Qibli's anxiety.

"And then *I* have a habit of saving your scales." Qibli mumbled, mainly to himself

Winter took one of Qiblis talons in his to get his attention. Qibli looked at him, frustration oozing from his every pore, but despite it, his eyes softened.

"Well," Winter attempted to joke, "My scales are invaluable. So you're doing a good service."

"Exactly!" Qibli agreed before freezing, "Wait, was that your attempt at a joke?"

Winter flushed, dropping his talons. "Yes."

The two arrived outside the cave of the history cave.

"Just shut up and accept it."

Qibli eased up enough to shoot a small, pleased smile. Grateful for

his effort.

Winter hesitated as he chose his next words, "...And I'm sorry for making you worry." he mumbled so quickly and quietly that if you weren't paying attention, you'd miss it. "It was pretty stupid of me."

Qibli looked over at him, his eyes soft and meaningful.

"It's alright, there's no need to be sorry. I never doubted YOU, but just seeing how resentfully she looked at you made me nervous, is all. I'm just glad that nothing happened." he replied sincerely before his face beamed, "Hey, what was that part you said about you being stupid? Can you say it again?"

Winter groaned, as he rubbed his face with his talons. He increased his pace to put distance between them.

"Nope." He answered, looking over his shoulder to grin at Qibli, "But I can repeat the thoughts I just had about you being annoying and insufferable. Still want to hear them?" he quipped

Qibli grinned, "Nah. I think you can keep those ones to yourself."

The two of them laughed and Winter slowed to let Qibli catch up, and he couldn't help but feel indebted to Qibli in a certain way. After all, when Qibli was around, Winter couldn't help but let his light fill the dark reaches of his mind and make him a better dragon.

Chapter 11 - Bygone Burdens

Preview:

That was then.

And now, as Winter was aware, Qibli checking in on him was just another way that he showed he cared through his actions. As though he WANTED to know where he was, and what he was doing.

And Winter had eventually begun caring what Qibli was doing, too.

Three moons, Winter had fallen hard. There was no way Winter could ever go back to the way he was. Not with Qibli around.

History with Webs occurred without a hitch and was about as interesting as Winter expected.

And his expectations weren't high to begin with.

He spent most of his time flickering his attention anxiously between Icicle, who had started giving him the cold shoulder, and Qibli who was talking in-length about the Outclaws.

When the gong sounded, Qibli looked to Winter expectantly. Winter slowed, waiting for Qibli to bid farewell to Moon, Kinkajou and Turtle.

He waited patiently. Winter had begun to grow used to Qibli wanting to touch base and discuss their course of activity during their breaks. At first, he hated that Qibli did this. Why couldn't Qibli just let Winter handle his own business for once? And if he was so interested, he could at least make an effort to speed up the process of asking. It seemed Like Qibli moved like he had all the time in the world.

That was then.

And now, as Winter was aware, Qibli checking in on him was just another way that he showed he cared through his actions. As though he WANTED to know where he was, and what he was doing.

And Winter had eventually begun caring what Qibli was doing, too.

Three moons, Winter had fallen hard. There was no way Winter could ever go back to the way he was. Not with Qibli around.

"What are you doing now?" Winter initiated as Qibli caught up and they began walking among the passing dragons.

"Well, I heard there's a music room that's calling my name. Can't let my drumming skills get rusty, can I?" he boasted, "You should stop by later, I'll even play you something."

Winter smiled at the promise and chuckled. Imagining a scene where Qibli played some heartfelt song for Winter. How would that go?

"You? Playing the drums? Yeah, alright." Winter teased, "And here I thought all you knew how to do was make little funny jokes all day. It's what you're best at."

Now it was Qibli who released a floodgate of unrestrained happiness. He leaned into Winter, resting his head on top of his affectionately.

"Yeah? I'm glad they're working on you." Winter shut his eyes, soaking in his comforting presence. Qibli emitted a certain protection and inclusivity to Winter that Winter never realized he needed or craved.

"What about you? Plans? Course of action?" Qibli asked a moment later, lifting his head from Winters.

Winter was silent for a moment as he thought.

"Well, I don't know how to play any instruments," he rationed

slowly, "so I think that I'll check on Bandit and see how he's doing." Winter devised. He'd been keeping a closer eye on Bandit ever since he had started making it a personal goal of his to obtain as much information as he could about Scavengers. Even little sulking ones like Bandit.

Truth was, he was terribly afraid that his pet was depressed, and Winter took it upon himself to help him. DESPITE Winter feeling like there was no good cause for Bandit to sulk, Moon had mentioned that Scavengers were social creatures that needed stimulation. He wasn't entirely sure that Scavengers were THAT deep, but it was worth exploring.

Qibli nodded and wished him luck as he and Winter parted ways. Winter allowed himself to watch the spot where Qibli had been until he was out of sight until he finally decided to return to his cave.

He frowned as he peered at Bandit (who was sleeping). Winter wanted to help Bandit but had no idea how he could possibly get another Scavenger to the school safely. He watched the creature's breathing rise up and down steadily, deep in its slumber.

Maybe the best thing I could do for him is to set him free, Winter thought as he hunched his shoulders. It took him a minute to realize that the same notion had once applied to himself, too.

He stuck around for a few minutes more, examining the careful and delicate decorations and furniture he had intricately made with his own talons, debating with the idea of setting Bandit free. Would he be happy if Winter built him more toys?

No, Winter moped, *he would be happier if he was free. Not trapped in a cage.*

Winter made up his mind. Tomorrow he would release the Scavenger. The same way his parents had to him and Icicle.

After he'd decided (and promised that he would stay true to his word), he wandered around the school, poking his head into occupied classrooms to observe other dragons.

After he exited the library, he touched his snout only to realize that he wore a small, content smile.

He was feeling freer and happier than he had in ages, no longer having his worth defined by ranking protocols.

A small part of him felt betrayal at his pleasure at the lack of overarching hierarchy. That was what he had grown up with and was expected to fit into, after all. But right now, he was just content as being himself. He felt content being friends with Qibli, Turtle, Kinkajou and even Moon, though he still struggled with admitting it. How could he ever show them how much they meant to him?

How could he ever repay them?

As sunset creeped into the windows, enveloping Winter in a tangerine hug, he remembered Qibli's offer earlie and how hopeful he had been at the prospect of Winter's listening to him play.

Maybe I'll take Qibli up on his song.

And when Winter padded his way into the music cave, he saw Qibli and few other dragons deeply entranced in focus as they played. Qibli's gaze flickered up at the shadow of a visitor and he immediately stopped. He smiled wide and remarked,

"Hey! Was hoping you'd stop by."

Winter's breath hitched as the light filtered and brightened through the window onto Qibli, making him glow and sparkle brighter than he already did. At seeing this, Winter's mouth automatically moved to say the words,

"Of course. How could I miss this?"

Qibli stared at him, his cheeks reddening, before he nodded to the other Sandwings and they resumed their playing,

It was music to Winter's ears.

Chapter 12 - Conspiracy Complications

Preview:

"Moon," Qibli coaxed softly, gently taking her shaking talons in his, instantly making Winter wish he were speaking to HIM that way. A thorn of envy pricked his gut. Qibli and Moon always had a way of looking so effortlessly intimate, even when they didn't mean to.

Not the time, Winter, he scolded himself, refocusing his attention. Qibli probably wasn't even trying to act charming right now, that's just how he naturally was.

Winter pondered whether he would ever experience another day as temperate and magical as he had the evening before. His pessimism told him 'no' - fortune was hardly ever in Winter's favour. That was to be expected.

But he'd forgotten that things could plume in less than twenty-four hours.

The morning sun filled the school with unclaimed potential, and even Winter had to admit: he was feeling good. It took him longer to feel homesick or for his mind to get stuck in the ruts of its familiar shame for being a willing outcast of his family. But he couldn't allow himself to get sucked into it - he had class to go to, after all. And dragons to spend time with.

Winter peered at Qibli from beneath lidded eyes. Qibli always rose

with the sun, and maybe as a result of it, had a little bit of it inside of him. His amber earring caught the sunlight streaking in through the sky hole, projecting magnificent rays of sparkling copper around the dorm. Qibli, oblivious to his beauty, silently sorted through his scrolls. He LOOKED like he was made for a beautiful summer day. Winter smiled contently beneath his talons as he stretched.

The day started off calm by dragon standards, the Jade Winglet met at the music cave for lessons on music theory and practice.

Winter maintained an optimism that classes like these were a wasted on him and taught him nothing practical, but he held his tongue regarding his complaints. Seeing the light in dragon's eyes brighten whenever they danced or experimented with the assortment of instruments was a good enough reason to respect music. He stood beside Moon and they observed side-by-side in withdrawn silence.

The trouble started after class as Winter and an eccentric Qibli began to return to Webs' class for day two history.

Winter listened on, amused, as Qibli spoke passionately of music and art. It was a creative and nerdy side of him Winter had yet to see. He listened and made comments, when necessary. He was enthralled by Qibli's enthusiasm which was beginning to reach even Kinkajou levels.

"It's so cool that they teach other things here besides history and math," Qibli chattered, "I mean, don't get me wrong! History is good and definitely necessary in preventing any future Sandwing Succession Wars, but having the ability to express yourself is just as important too, y'know?"

Winter concurred and grunted in his agreement, "True. We rarely played instruments in the Ice Kingdom, only for royal events. And only the instruments Queen Glacier liked. But I mean, how can a piece of metal even be considered an instrument? It's just scrap metal; you might as well just make something else out of it."

The two approached the hall to the history cave in a casual stroll.

"The triangle? That's a popular percussion instrument, Winter! How do you not know that?" Qibli sighed dramatically, "Am I going to have to be the creative genius in this relationship? Come on, you need to start pulling your weight in that field, I'm sure you know a thing or two about music." Qibli nudged Winter encouragingly

"I really don't!" Winter protested, turning up his chin to conceal his blue cheeks, "This seems like a Sandwing thing. Or maybe just a 'you' thing. Probably for the best that we stay away from it." Winter quipped, "How did you get so into it, anyway?"

"Obviously other tribes have music too, it's not like Sandwings have a patent on the music industry." Qibli explained zealously returning to his speech, "But see, back in the Outclaws, once a month we -"

"Don't go in there!!" A breathless, frantic voice shrieked, barreling towards the two, "You can't!"

Moon's wild eyes met concerned bejeweled blue and amber ones. Behind her, she blocked the entrance to the history cave with her wings.

Moon clutched her head and began sliding forward. Winter flapped his wings in alarm as both he and Qibli leaned forward to catch her.

"What is wrong with you?" Winter asked indignantly, panic lacing his tone.

He met Qibli's equally stunned expression, "What's wrong with her? A Nightwing thing?"

"I don't know many Nightwings, but I don't think fainting is a 'Nightwing thing'." he responded, stepping away to cautiously poke his head into the history cave.

"NO! STOP!" Moon cried, scrambling out of Winters arms to pull Qibli back, "Listen, you CAN'T go in there!" she gripped Qibli furiously, talons digging into his shoulders with effort. Sweat ran down the outline of her jaw.

"It's not safe! You need to get out!"

Qibli easily ducked and stepped out from her grasp worriedly.

"Okay..." Winter drawled with suspicion as he paced around behind them, "What's going on? What do you know? Why isn't it 'safe'?" he demanded firmly, like the way his father always did with him. A direct approach had always worked with Winter in the past, but seemed to only increase Moon's state of agitation. She looked as though she were about to burst into tears.

"Moon," Qibli coaxed softly, gently taking her shaking talons in his. An action that instant made Winter wish that Qibli were speaking to HIM that way. A thorn of envy pricked his gut. Qibli and Moon always had a way of looking so effortlessly intimate, even when they didn't mean to.

Not the time, Winter, he scolded himself, refocusing his attention. Qibli probably wasn't even trying to act charming right now, that's just how he naturally was.

"It's alright. It's safe in there. I've checked, and nothing looks out of place. Carnelian is there and she's -"

"WAIT, Carnelian is in there? Moon repeated, her voice rising as she spoke, "You need to get her out NOW! Please!"

As hearing her genuineness, Qibli bounded into the classroom without a second thought, booming,

"Carnelian, you and everyone else need to get out of here now! Somethings about to happen - and it's not good."

"What are you on about?" Winter heard a raspy voice gruff at him.

Winter glanced as Moon who stared intently after Qibli. She looked wild with terror. He reluctantly briefly brushed his wings with hers like Qibli always did for him as a token of comfort.

"Just do as he says." Winter ordered in agreement with Qibli, starting to help Moon walk to Kinkajou.

And that's all that was heard before fire came to swallow their world.

For a brief terrifying moment, Winter watched a fire spontaneously erupt and swallow the entire cave in flames within seconds, a bright and uncomfortably warm doom.

His eyes widened. And from in front of him Qibli flinched back, the force of the explosion angrily tossing him into a wall in its wake - as though he weighed nothing. After it came shards of glass that stabbed after him like miniature spears.

"Qibli!" Winter howled silently. All the air was forcefully released from his lungs as he himself was thrown besides Moon. He scrambled to his feet, feeling fortunate that he wasn't hurt enough to keep him from moving.

Moon coughed violently beside him as black smoke filled the air. New scrapes and scratches dotted her underbelly.

Winter stared outwardly, frozen in place by fear. Every other dragon still lay with pained expressions. What could he do? How could HE do anything when all of his other attempts in life had been fruitless?

Could he be brave, just this once?

Chapter 13 - Disputes

!!SLIGHT GORE WARNING!! (Nothing TOO gory - just some scratches and burns. Contains a dead dragon :( )

Preview:

Winter and Qibli's eyes widened, and Winter asked,

"Can you walk?"

"It'll be fine."

"No," Winter asked again firmly, "I'm asking you if you CAN walk not if you can TRY to walk."

Qibli smiled softly and Winter felt weak. It was such a smile that radiated of warmth and trust. And Winter knew that if Qibli smiled them a million more times he'd have crows-feet smile lines when he was older. Once was more than Winter could ask for, but he knew he wanted to see more of them.

Other dragons wailed and groaned nearby as their shock wore off. Fire began slowly clawing its way from its temporary containment within the cave, licking away at the walls leaving only a charred mark in its remanence. It was as though a starved fire-breathing dragon had just been released.

And it was going to make a meal of the dragonets

"Moon!" Winter shouted, crouching beside her as his joints finally sprang into action. he unfurled his wing to help her up as she coughed. Her eyes were bloodshot. "Are you okay?! What was that?"

In the corner of his eye, he spotted Qibli making an effort to stand on wobbled and bloodied legs so he could reach Winter and Moon.

"Qibli!" Winter barked over the roaring flame, "Stay there! Let me take care of this!"

He added gently, "You've done enough. We'll get help!"

Beside him, Moon's weight lessened as Kinkajou hurried to lift her other side, tears running down her face in worry.

Winter and she met eyes and he nodded appreciatively.

Moon's eyes were glazed over in fear, looking at nothing in particular as she was deep in thought.

A Mudwing bounded out of the hall to announce they were going to get help.

"Let's get her away from the fire!" he suggested to Kinkajou

"You got it!"

The two of them dragged Moon as far away from the fire as they could, syncing their movements carefully. Kinkajou was stronger than he'd thought she would be. Stronger than he'd thought a Rainwing COULD be.

"Where's Icicle?" someone cried

Winter felt his insides freeze and squeeze painfully at the words.

He hadn't even thought about the possibility of her being in the cave. But it was true - her Winglet had history with them next.

He couldn't lose another sibling.

"She's alright, she wasn't in there." Qibli's voice answered, slightly muddled. Instant relief rushed over Winter. He would never let himself live himself down if he was responsible for both Hailstorm and Icicle's deaths. As long as he was nearby, it had to be him.

Winter stood lightheaded and dazed, taking frigid deep breaths until he remembered that there were still other dragons that needed help.

The three of them suddenly jumped clear of a smoking trail narrowly missing an orange blur as it barreled into the flames.

Peril had come. And brought hope instead of death on her heels.

"Let me help you with that." A voice offered from behind him. When Winter turned and immediately recognized his Seawing clawmate, Turtle.

Turtle scooted Winter out of the way and took his spot, looking at Kinkajou who stood across him. Winter noticed that Turtle eyed her protectively, making sure he pulled his weight and helped her whenever he could. He watched Kinkajou with the same expression that Winter did with Qibli. One of concern and respect.

Winter turned and rushed over to Qibli who had pulled himself up and was clutching his arm painfully as he waited for Peril to emerge.

"Are you alright?" Winter asked as he peered at Qibli's wounds, "Has Peril come out yet?"

"Not yet. And I'm fine," Qibli responded, wincing as he viewed his arm, "Other than feeling like I've been stabbed by a thousand mini swords, nothing too serious. But I can't say that I recommend the experience, though."

Winter released a breathless chuckle of relief at Qibli. But as he did, his eyes kept flickering down at Qibli's scales. Dozens of little thorns were wedged beneath his scales, coupled with rogue glass shards that had broken around him. It seemed that he had blocked the blunt of the thorn explosions with his bare back. Winter frowned sympathetically.

"What about you?" Qibli asked

Before he could get an answer, however, loud breathing and claws scrabbled against the cave as Peril threw herself from out of the fire, carrying a dragon fireman style on her shoulder, burnt.

A gasp escaped from Moon as Peril lowered the dragon and ran back into the flames.

How many others were in there?

Winter and Qibli's eyes widened, and Winter asked,

"Can you walk?"

"It'll be fine."

"No," Winter asked again firmly, "I'm asking you if you CAN with certainty walk, not if you're going to TRY to walk."

Qibli smiled softly and Winter felt weak. It was such a smile that radiated of warmth and trust. And Winter knew that if Qibli smiled them a million more times he'd have crows-feet smile lines when he was older. Seeing that smile was more than Winter could ever hope to see, but he knew he wanted to see more of them.

But maybe not in a life-or-death situation.

He made sure Qibli was walking alright before heading over to the dragon, which had been identified as Tamarin. She, luckily, seemed to be breathing.

Peril burst through the cave once more gasping smoke. Winter leapt away from her as she dropped two other dragons, or at least, the corpses of two.

Everyone froze in shock to take in the sight. It had to have been Carnelian. And a Nightwing.

"That's...everyone." Peril sputtered as Sunny and Tsunami bounded in.

Tsunami furrowed her brows and Clay took a sharp breath, his eyes becoming glassy as he saw the dragons. He woefully muttered,

"Oh no..."

Winter approached the flames tentatively, breathing a large plume of frost breath at the flames to cool them down.

After a moment everything fell silent, and Winter stepped back to

allow the teachers, Peril and Turtle to talk and find solutions.

Winters shock has now been replaced by a new, burning feeling as though he'd swallowed and absorbed the fire when he put it out. He was ANGRY. Particularly at Moon. How long had she known about this? Why didn't she tell any teachers?

Two dragons were dead now.

"I was right..." Winter grumbled as he ran to the corner where the other dragonets were and shook Moon's shoulder. More pathetically than he'd felt, lacking the extreme anger he'd felt moments earlier. He couldn't muster up his familiar anger now that he was looking at her. He couldn't connect the pieces between the timid Nightwing who'd offered advice to him days earlier, and the one who knew about the explosion that would kill dragons.

"...there is something weird about you. And you're going to tell us everything." he demanded

Behind him, Qibli shook his head as though to say, 'not the time.'

But yes! This WAS the perfect time!

"Nightwing related or not. You're going to tell us NOW." he spat threateningly, "Or I have a few guesses I wouldn't mind sharing."

Moon shook beneath his grasp, shuddering and avoiding eye contact.

"Well?" he seethed

"Dude, calm down, you're not thinking straight!"

Winter felt Moon slip from beath his talons as he was hauled off and dragged from her her by easy strength.
"Excuse us, for a moment." Qibli apologized, furrowing his brows.

Qibli shot Winter a look and said, "Let's go cool down and think things through."

Winter and Qibli stepped away from the group and continued down

the hallway speaking in hushed voices, the light avoided them as though giving them their space, too.

"Not cool, Winter. I know you and I had our suspicions about her, *privately*. But now is kind of a bad time to bring it up. We need to apologize." Qibli explained calmly, but behind it was a wall of exasperation caused by Winters behavior.

APOLOGIZE? Thought Winter incredulously, starting to rear up, *I'VE done nothing to be sorry for! She's the one who's been deceiving us!*

"Why should I apologize?" Winter snapped, "In case you missed it, we almost died! And she would have let us!" Winter stamped angrily, "Was your brain muddled when the explosion happened? Has it come back to reality yet?"

Qibli's cool façade fell, and he snarled, "She wouldn't have let us die! Classic Winter, too hung up on the fact that she's a Nightwing to remember that she's the one who told us to stay away from the cave! She's our FRIEND! Is that concept so hard to grasp?"

"And look where that got us!" Winter boomed. So much for hushed voices.

This was wrong. Winter didn't want to be arguing with Qibli. He felt anxious and sick after seeing all those dragonets, but he didn't want to lash out his anxiety and fears at Qibli after everything he's done.

...Aw, poor Winter. His little ice wings melted from flying too close to the sun. echoed his father's patronizing voice from within his head

Winter squeezed his eyes shut, trying to drown out his voice. Why was he always there? Waiting for him to slip up? And always without fail, judgmental?

Winter gritted his teeth. He desperately needed to sort out his feelings. And a place to escape the opinions of his family, looming darkly like an oncoming storm in his mind.

Winter eyes flashed wildly back to Qibli's hardened ones. His expression reflected self-contained neutrality once more, hiding

whatever true feelings he was experiencing.

Winter felt betrayed by that. By Qibli's disappointment in him, and admittedly, even Winter himself had begun to feel embarrassed by his outburst. Embarrassed by his old habit of lashing out through violence and insults in order to protect himself and demonstrate his authority. But he knew he couldn't do that now. Not if he cared.

His turmoil finally ended in a sigh as he considered his next words - something he hadn't thought about doing in a long time - not since Hailstorm had been captured. Right now, however, he wanted to be different - kinder. There was strength in kindness. And he wanted to be it for himself and for his friends.

He was not the disgraceful prince his parents thought he was.

"I need some space right now." Winter grunted

"Yeah." Qibli muttered dazed, "Yeah. Okay. I understand. That's probably for the best." he agreed sighing

As Winter swept through the other stunned, shocked dragons he said to Qibli, "We'll talk later, alright?" before sweeping past Moon and pausing to look her directly in the eye, "And you too. I have a feeling that you have a LOT of explaining to do."

Chapter 14 - Problem Solving

Preview:

In the peripherals of Qiblis eye, he saw the flash of a crystal white Icewing.

When Qibli turned to fully looked over, he was correct. An Icewing who looked startlingly similar to Winter glided beside him smoothly. A contemptuous and snooty smile played at her snout.

Why do I feel like I'm being hunted? Qibli thought, immediately squaring his shoulders

"Icicle." Qibli acknowledged, showing off his quick memorization skills

"Correct!" she replied, "Glad you know an Icewing princess when you see one."

"Three Moons, " Kinkajou whispered softly, breaking the uncomfortable silence that lingered between the remaining Jade Winglet. The silence was heavy with the weight of unsaid thoughts and feelings.

Qibli sighed. "Wow." he held his head in his talons, "What a mess."

"Moon," Kinkajou pleaded, abnormally quiet, "Can't you tell us how you knew? Maybe that would help calm everyone down."

Doubt hung in the air like stifling air, begging for a window of truth to alleviate it.

Turtle gasped, his Seawing marks glowing in surprise as his epiphany set in.

"You had a vision, didn't you?" he asked softy, non-accusingly

Qibli and Kinkajou jumped in surprise.

Of course, Qibli and Winter had their theories about Moon all along, but hearing someone else voice them aloud was a strange and confirming feeling.

"Yes," Moon admitted nervously

Instantly there was an outcry of betrayal from Kinkajou

"What?! What have you seen? Why didn't you tell ME?"

Maybe Winter was right in a way, Qibli thought in alarm, *if she really did have a vision, why didn't she tell anyone?*

Moon met his eyes guiltily, Qibli narrowed his eyes and interrogated her.

"How long have you known?"

Was there anything more we could've done? he asked himself privately mourning the losses and his own failures

"I just saw it only right before class - the visions just randomly happen - I swear! I would've done more if I could!" she insisted to him, "And none of you would've believed me anyway!

"You saved us..." Kinkajou breathed to herself as she processed the rest of Moon's sentence, woundedly "And I would have! Can't you trust me?" she protested

What about the others? We were saved but..., images of Carnelian invaded Qibli's mind as he thought, tuning the others out, *Could I have done anything more?*

"So is that it?" Turtle piped in, "Is that all you can do?"

Moon stared curiously at Turtle as Qibli blurted, "You can't read minds too, can you?"

".... yes." she said after a moment

The air was sucked from the room.

This explained a lot of their interactions, and for that, Qibli was relieved that the mystery of her uncanny awareness could be explained. But he felt indignant that Moon had been snooping around his mind, always having the high ground over him in every situation.

What would Winter think?

Did this change everything? Did Moon know about his plans to get Winter to like him all along? What did she think? Did she know about the thing's he'd done in Scorpion Den? Of Thorn saving him?

Or the constant thought he had of holding Winter's talons in his?

Would she say anything?

"No!" Moon cried looking at him. "I would never! Those are yours! You're a good dragon, there's nothing wrong with those thoughts, they're completely natural!"

Snakes and tails, Qibli realized, *she must have read Winter's mind the entire time too!*

A small whisper in his head asked before Qibli could push it down,

What has she seen? What does he think of me?

Qibli flushed the thought from his head. It felt like the night sky had fallen on him.

"I can't think right now. I've gotta go."

Ignoring the calls of Moon from behind him, Qibli dashed from the hall.

He wanted to run back to the cave dorms to tell Winter EVERYTHING.

But he decided against it. It wasn't his place to, firstly. And secondly, Winter obviously needed space. The last thing he needed

to hear was that his Nightwing superstitions had come to fruition.

Besides, Qibli needed to think, too.

Qibli flew out the nearest window and circled the school, urging himself to overcome his thoughts. He was bigger than them.

"You're fast." a voice drawled icily from beside him.

In the peripherals of Qiblis eye, he saw the flash of a white Icewing.

When Qibli turned to fully looked over, he was correct. An Icewing who looked startlingly similar to Winter glided beside him smoothly. A contemptuous and snooty smile played at her snout.

Why do I feel like I'm being hunted? Qibli thought, immediately squaring his shoulders

"Icicle." Qibli acknowledged, showing off his quick memorization skills

"Correct!" she jaunted, "Glad you know an Icewing princess when you see one."

Qibli smirked slightly, recognizing her signature royal Icewing entitlement, like the one Winter had demonstrated constantly to Qibli when they'd first met.

Except Winter was more charming and likeable than the self-righteousness Icicle displayed.

But Qibli had already befriended one royal descendant of 'her majesty, Queen Glacier', so what was another? He forced a disarming, friendly smile at her, leaning into his friendliness.

"How could I not? I don't know many other dragons prouder to be one Queen Glacier's nieces and nephews than you two."

Icicle sniffed, "True. But I can assure you that I've got a lot more to be proud for than my brother."

Qibli frowned, redirecting his gaze back towards the rushing ground

beneath them. He didn't like her already.

"Anyway," she continued when Qibli didn't respond, "This is highly unusual for me, but I have a favor to ask you. Are you going to help me or not?"

Qibli titled his wings, catching the breeze as sun glinted in his onyx eyes. He squinted.

"Well, it depends on what it is," he adjudged, "But honestly, I get the feeling it's probably something I shouldn't do." before sheepishly adding, "or illegal."

Icicle smiled thinly at him, as though he were a dragonet who was testing her patience. Qibli's eyes caught the way she curled her claws inward as she flew, clearly aggravated by his hesitance.

Wow, okay, so watch the claws..., he noted, already strategizing the best course of combat against her if she decided to strike, *is she expecting trouble?*

No wait, - he interjected, *she's Winter's sister. I won't fight her. Okay, nice thoughts. Not fighting Winter's sister kind of thoughts. I'm sure she's fine. A little arrogant? Definitely. With some complex against Winter? Yeah. With razor sharp claws? Sure, but she's fine. Nothing I can't handle,* He instructed himself half-heartedly, dragging his gaze back to her face where she stared at him with a mischievous smile.

She had noticed his evaluation of her claws and was glancing down at them with pride, commenting,

"You're clever. Heard that about you."

Qibli raised a brow at her, humoring her, "Really? From who? Guess I didn't realize I was already so renowned for my quick genius." he grinned

"My brother told me." she answered, smirking, earning a faint blush from Qibli

Winter thinks I'm intelligent?

"Speaking of," she cut in, "my favor involves you solving a little mystery of mine regarding him."

"Maybe." Qibli replied suspiciously, instinctively tipping his wings back to appear stronger and more serious. "You can try asking."

"My brother...," she began, "he's not really with that Rainwing filth, is he?" she sighed, not waiting for an answer before continuing, "Which means that surprisingly - this is the one gross outlier to his usual predictability, and I'm back to square one."

"Sounds like you're coming to all these conclusions by yourself." Qibli replied as he guided them down to land on the peak of a mountain to talk.

Once she landed, she turned to face him with ominous sky-blue eyes.

Qibli held his ground. He'd already caught on to what her request would be, after days of watching Winter and her, talk and argue (mainly the latter), and he sighed, feeling exasperated. When would she give this up?

"And well," she offered, tapping a claw lightly against her chin, "I just had a feeling you might know more about him than me."

Ouch. Qibli flinched sympathetically, vaguely reminded of his own siblings that he'd left in Scorpion Den, *that's gotta hurt.*

"Maybe I do," Qibli responded tiredly, thinking of Winter again "but I don't think it's what you'd expect. What are you going to do about it?"

Icicle sniffed, "Obviously I'd put a stop to it. It strictly goes against everything the Icewing's have fought for. Haven't you heard about what happened to our Icewing animus? Prince Arctic?"

The name rang a quiet bell. Perhaps he'd heard it from the whispers in Scorpion Den or in his occasional trips to Possibility. Stories told of a traitor prince and a benevolent Nightwing giving birth to the dragon taken straight from Pyhrria's worst legends and nightmares.

But surely, the story was highly fabricated. How could such evil possibly come from such a powerful love?

And more importantly, how could she even compare Winter to him?

"Sure," Qibli obliged smoothly, "But a clever dragon like you must realize that Winter ISN'T Arctic."

Icicle's reaction was immediate as she turned her chin upwards in a defiant motion.

"Yes, but if Arctic taught us anything, it's that nothing helpful comes from inter-tribe relationships."

Qibli shrugged, "I wouldn't read that much into it. When you're as wicked as Arctic, I don't think marrying out of your tribe in the main issue."

Icicle remained silent, scowling. Her blue eyes stared intently at a particularly large boulder ahead.

Qibli felt the weight of his words rustle and process in her mind and remained silent so she could mull them over.

He began to feel the soreness from his non-stop day flying creep into his muscles, and he allowed himself to slouch as he waited.

He still shot frequent side-eyes cautionary glances towards her, though.

The sun cast an orange glow signaling sunset, and Qibli knew they needed to be back at the soon for dinner.

As he stood and stretched his wings, Icicle had yet to speak, and he was beginning to suspect that she wouldn't - that she would remain firm in her discontent.

Finally, a moment later as he peered at Jade Mountain against the glint of the sun, she muttered,

"It's you, isn't it?"

Qibli quirked an amused brow. That was not the big reaction he'd been expecting. The vision he'd imagined involved a lot more... yelling. Or a revelation of some sort.

"This is me, yes." he answered jokingly

"No." she snapped glaring up at him, shrouded in his shadow. "YOU'RE the one Winter's seeing."

It wasn't a question so much as a statement.

Chapter 15 - An Olive Branch

Preview:

Qibli entered their dorm and took a few meaningful steps in... before being immediately pushed out.

"You can't be in here." Winter stated firmly as he pushed. Qibli dragged his claws to slow his banishment.

"What? Why not?" he protested, "This is MY dorm too!"

And more quietly he added, "And I wanted to talk now."

Winter's strength faltered a miniscule amount before he regained it and insisted hastily.

"I'll come find you later. I'm in the middle of something important right now. Can you wait for me in the dining hall?" he asked as Qibli was finally fully pushed back out into the hallway, standing awkwardly.

Qibli let a gust of wind blow between them, rustling Icicle's glistening spines and tingling Qibli's amber earring placidly, given the situation.

Qibli sighed, ready for a conversation change.

"Honestly, Winter isn't dating ANYONE, if that's reassuring." he explained as she raised a skeptical brow at him that practically snarled, 'as if I believe THAT'.

New words formed in Qibli's mouth as he sat thinking. Words of hope and intention he had purposely avoided saying aloud or thinking too deep into until right now. It was as if a rock had been lodged from his throat, allowing him to speak openly and honestly.

"But maybe I'll change that." he claimed with optimistic determination, his eyes shining with newfound affection at the thought of Winter.

Icicle dug her claws into the ground and her face contorted into a series of different emotions. Qibli guessed she was having an internal argument with herself.

I wonder who's winning, he thought amusedly, watching as she scowled at nothing in particular.

Yet he waited patiently, although he was eagerly anticipating her response to his sudden boldness.

After a long moment she barked forcefully, "Fine. I still can't say that I approve of this. But if Winter's going to be foolish for any dragon, I suppose you're not the worst option." she complimented off-handedly, "Not killable, at least."

Qibli snorted. "Oh, thanks. Glad that I'm not quite on the 'to kill' list just yet." he joked, delighted by her approval of him

She huffed, "Whatever. I'm done here. I have more urgent promises to keep than watching over my brother." she declared snootily as she stood and spread her crystal wings, reflecting the light like orange slivers of the sun.

"Yeah? Like what? Trying to find out who Winter's secret crush is? Oh, wait!..." he laughed as she frowned

"No." she said seriously, "He's been moping like his moody scavenger all day. I can't stand it. It's pathetic, really. He said how he was 'glad' that I wasn't in the history room earlier." she recalled disinterestedly as Qibli listened intently, "And I'm sure he is, he doesn't need another Icewing's blood on his claws."

Icicle thought considerably for a moment before grumbling, "No idea what HIS problem is now. Seems like there's a new one every day."

"Yeah," Qibli offered thoughtfully in return, "But he's strong. He can handle them."

Icicle cringed and rolled her eyes as though what Qibli had uttered was rotten.

"Anyways," Icicle declared abruptly as she approached the edge of the cliff, "let's hope we never need to speak again."

Qibli blinked, "Uh, yeah. Alright." he attempted waving at her slightly.

She nodded briskly before flying towards Jade Moutain, leaving nothing but swift wingbeats in her wake.

Qibli allowed himself to process their whole interaction before dismissing his whirlwind of thoughts with, "Well, at least that's taken care of."

He leapt off, following her direction back to the mountain.

He thought he could handle hearing Moon out now. It was time to reconcile, but first, he was determined to make up with Winter.

Qibli touched down through a wide-open window and marched with resolved steps to their shared dorm. Relief flushed over him. He couldn't bear the thought of them not speaking to one another any longer.

Qibli entered their dorm and took a few meaningful steps in... before being immediately pushed out.

Winter had been sitting with his back turned to the doorway as he muttered and grumbled, tinkering meticulously with a small, wired mahogany box. Qibli barely had a chance to realize that the room was considerably roomier due to the recent subtraction of Bandit's cage.

He got rid of it? he thought incredulously, as he was startled out of his thoughts by a variety of intricate sounds

The box Winter was so focused on made sudden noises ranging from soft, delicate notes to strained metallic ones. Winter sighed frustratedly, rubbing his face. His jaw was set with firm resolute. Qibli once again realized how handsome he was. No wonder why

dragons would often stare with envy or admiration.

Upon hearing talons thump closer to him, however, Winter whipped around accusingly, his eyes wide. In an instant he was on his talons and pushing a surprised Qibli out.

"You can't be in here." Winter stated firmly as he pushed. Qibli dragged his claws to slow his banishment.

"What? Why not?" He protested, "This is MY dorm too!"

And more quietly he added, "And I wanted to talk now."

Winter's strength faltered a miniscule amount before he regained it and insisted hastily.

"I'll come find you later. I'm in the middle of something important right now. Can you wait for me in the dining hall?" he asked as Qibli was finally fully pushed back out into the hallway, standing awkwardly.

Qibli frowned as Winter spread his wings to shield Qibli's view of the dorm. He had expected that there was a chance that the stubborn Winter might still have held a grudge against him, but he had expected more anger in that case not... distraction. Winter was too distracted to accept his olive branch.

Winter picked up on Qibli's displeasure and offered, more softly, "I'll come see what you're up to later, alright? Just let me finish my...project. Then we'll talk."

Qibli chuckled slightly at Winter's perceptiveness. "Okay, I can do that." he agreed, "But don't take too long. I know a lot of dragons who want us back on speaking terms." he smirked

Winter folded his wings, and Qibli subtly tried to look past him into the room to see what he was hiding. Winter leaned against the opening, blocking it from view once more with a handsome, sly smirk. Qibli flushed and Winters wolfish grin became wider at his reaction.

Winter knew how to work his charm.

"What dragons?" he asked drawlingly, "You mean yourself?"

Qibli heart raced as his threw Winter one of his signature lop-sided grins, "Thats right, what you're looking at right now is the dragon who wants to see you the most. You can't deprive him of that."

Winter flushed in retaliation, a playful smile playing on his snout.

"Please, he can't possibly want to see me more than I want to see him." he mumbled as Qibli brushed his wings affectionately against Winter's.

"So what's stopping us?" he asked

Suddenly it seemed as if Winter's attention shifted back into focus, he stood straighter and said,

"You'll see. If you leave now, I might be finished within the next century or so." he smiled kindly

Qibli grinned. It felt like a massive weight had been lifted from his scales. Like he had finally washed off dry, suffocating mud.

"Don't keep your darling waiting," Qibli responded coyly, hoping to earn another blush from Winter, who in response nodded and remained calm.

"I won't." He promised, "Now, get going."

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Now that Qibli had (almost) solved one of his more pressing issues, he could finally go find Moon.

He found her sitting alone in the corner of the dining hall looking forlorn. He put on the most collected expression he could muster and approached her.

To say she was delighted would be an understatement.

She radiated relief as the two of them discussed the implications of being the first Nightwing with powers in centuries. Moon clearly
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was uncomfortable about speaking so brazenly about her mind-reading abilities, but she answered and encouraged any of Qibli's questions - which there were a lot of.

She apologized for her deceptiveness and Qibli respected that and felt sympathetic even though he still had his reservations. He was just glad that things were finally starting to cool down in their frienship group.

As he and Moon switched topics to theorizing possible suspects to who set off the explosion earlier, Qibli began zoning out, his eyes frequently flickering to the open archway of the cave expectantly.

Qibli wondered if he was being impatient or if Winter was *really* taking his time. The dining hall had gradually been emptying over the past hour, leaving only a few late dragons and themselves left in the dining room.

Finally, Moon shut her eyes sympathetically and asked placidly, "Is something the matter?"

No doubt Moon had already seen what was on Qibli's mind but was making an active effort to not privately assume. For that, Qibli noticed and appreciated her.

He threw her a small smile,

"Just waiting for Winter, he said he'd be here soon. But that was about a millennia ago at this point."

Moon chuckled and reached forward to place a talon on his comfortingly.

"He'll be here soon," she reassured him, hesitating, "Um, Qibli... could you keep my mind reading and seer abilities a secret for a little while longer? I want to be the one to tell Winter about them. He deserves to hear the truth from me."

Qibli nodded, swelling with respect and depth for the timid, but ultimately righteously honest Nightwing before him. He could definitely get behind her request.

"You're right," he agreed, "he does."

"Do you think he'll forgive me?"

"Definitely, who else is he going to talk to about scavengers?"

Moon and Qibli smiled at one another for a moment regardfully. Qibli liked Moon, he could tell she truly was repentant for hiding such an important side of her, and that she really did want to salvage their friendship.

Qibli was pleased that his initial intuition for her had been correct. She held herself timidly but in moments like these, she shined. Glowing with power and respect for her peers, but with such a kindness that she didn't NEED reciprocated. She chose to be kind without expecting it in to be transacted in return, simply because that was just the type of dragon she was.

She would make a good friend.

"Ahem." a gruff voiced sounded from behind them.

Moon startled forward as Qibli glanced up, his eyes brightening and his heart skipping a beat.

"Winter!" he cheered enthusiastically, a blush and smile instantly taking its signature place on his features. Winter smirked at Qiblis reaction and quirked a brow. Qibli abruptly cleared his throat and said in his best serious Winter impression,

"I mean, took you long enough."

The white dragon rolled his eyes dismissively and reached to swat him playfully with one wing.

"It took a bit longer than I expected, but I'm here now, aren't I? I think you'll find it to be well worth the wait once you see it."

Qibli grinned sincerely, "I'm sure I will. With a clever, very shiny and determined dragon like you creating it, it'll either work brilliantly or explode. Maybe both."

Winter chuckled heartily almost immediately causing Qibli to fidget and shift on his haunches uncharacteristically nervous.

"Ready to see it?" he proposed a minute later

Qibli halted and glanced at Moon, silently seeking approval.

"Right now?" Qibli confirmed with barely veiled excitement.

"Yes, right now would be perfect."

Moon easily relented and waved a talon bidding farewell. As Qibli followed Winter out of the cave, Moon grabbed his shoulder and whispered, "I'll do some investigating and we'll meet up later...have fun."

Qibli flushed and put on a boost of speed to catch up with Winter.

When they arrived to their dorm Qibli noticed that Winter had taken some of the colorful luminescent globes usually strewn about in the hallways and had placed them over the candles in their dorm, dazzling the room in an array of warm pinks, reds, and oranges.

"Awesome," Qibli commented, "I see! The surprise is that you've done some redecorating to make our dorm look like the art room. You're right: this WAS worth it. Our dorm has never looked better."

Winter grinned handsomely, "You think that's awesome? Wait until you see this!"

He reached beneath his bed and lifted the small mahogany box from earlier. He spun a metal handle extending from the side of the box a few times, and when he released it, slow soft notes rang harmoniously in the room. Winter stared evaluating the box for a moment, ensuring its success before he turned to Qibli, face flushed blue, holding out a talon as he asked,

"Dance with me?"

Qibli's eyes shot open, and he flushed his own equally incriminating shade of red. He gently placed his talon in his as Winter pulled him close.

"Of course." Qibli blurted, but his actions already spoke for themselves, "But just so you know, I was one of the best dancers at Scorpion Den."

"Yeah?" Winters voiced hummed against his ear, "But how good are you at this?"

On cue, the music box sped up slightly, increasing the tempo to a waltz speed. Winter effortlessly guided them into their dance as Qibli stumbled slightly, trying to find his footing. After a moment, Qibli quickly found his rhythm and focused on keeping up. He wasn't used to formal ballroom dancing; he was more traditionally acclimated in freestyle movements. But he loved a challenge.

"Keep up, otherwise you'll get stomped on," Winter challenged, smirking

The music continued as Winter, in one swift and precisely planned motion, twirled Qibli and spun him into a low dip.

"Woah," Qibli breathed, "maybe you do have some prince left in you after all. Tell me, Winter, do you also sing to foxes and bears in the forest, too?

Winter smirked, "You're only noticing now?" He leaned in close, almost touching snouts with Qibli as they danced, "Why?" he croaked, "Do you like it when I act like a prince?"

Qibli found his face overheating, he gulped the lump in his throat as he replied earnestly, "I like it when you act like yourself despite being Queen Glaciers nephew."

Now it was Winters turn to be flustered. He cleared his throat nervously as he slowed their pace so they could talk.

"I'm sorry for my outburst earlier," he mumbled, "I was angry, and confused - but mostly betrayed. I mean, we were JUST told that Nightwing powers didn't exist anymore and now there's a chance Moon might have them?" Winter flipped one of his wings up in exasperation before dutifully returning it back to its place on Qibli's waist, "Who's even telling the truth anymore?"

Qibli hummed his consideration. By now the music had slowed a quiet slow dance as Qibli responded,

"Yeah, I get it. I'm not really sure what this means now either." He admitted, "But all I know is that I will do my best to do right by you. And I know that Moon will too. She's our friend, and you've got me at your back, now and always." he promised meeting Winters icy blue eyes, painted in gold lighting.

Winter eyes crinkled with adoration.

"You can count on that much from me, too." Winter assured fiercely, "If anyone has a problem with you, they'll have a problem with me."

"It's like I said earlier, we're together. As a team and friends." Qibli smiled.

Their faces lit with happiness as their dance came to a still. They remained facing one another, slightly panting, as they still gripped onto one another with twined tails. Their hearts thumped in unison.

Winter assessed Qibli for a moment, realizing that now would be the perfect moment for being honest to Qibli about the whispers of his heart. About his desire to be something more than just a fake lover. He inhaled meaningfully, gauging how best to word his confession.

"Qibli, I -"

"Uh, Winter" Qibli interjected at the same moment. Upon realizing what he'd done, he motioned for Winter to continue who just shook his head with embarrassment and prodded, "Go ahead."

"Uh, I've been thinking about our whole faking dating thing, y'know? And you were right, it doesn't seem right to lie to dragons about this sort of thing," he began nervously.

Winters heart sank like a ship blown open by a cannon ball. Maybe Winter had been reading the signals all wrong. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe he was just oblivious. Winter looked away.

"Which is why I wanted to ask if you wanted to make it real." he

finished, cupping Winters cheek with his talon, and turning it gingerly to meet his striking eyes.

Winter was quiet for a moment, processing his words until he finally exploded with a distinguished and elegant,

"HUH?"

Because Qibli had stolen the words from right out of his mouth.

Winter buried his face into Qiblis scales to hide his blushing face. He tapped Qiblis arm lightly as he mumbled, "That was supposed to be my line."

Winter felt Qiblis heartrate leap dramatically as he let out a booming chortle, echoing Winter words with love. Between giggles he commented, "Now that's an unusual shade of blue I haven't seen before on your face."

Winter released from Qibli and turned his back to him.

"Aw, come on." Qibli protested sweetly, "Don't be like that. I like seeing it! Honest!"

But Winter wasn't hiding it from Qibli, he realized, as Winter spun the metal wand of the music box once more.

Winter turned to him, unapologetically blushing and smiling giddily as he asked, "Think you can handle some more?"

Qibli felt his legs nearly buckle as he approached Winter invitingly

"You bet I can! This time let's see if you can keep up with me." he challenged, intertwining their talons together and entering another waltz.

The two of them danced and laughed with newfound love as the night was swept along in brilliant song and blazing passion.

Chapter 16 - No Stone Left Unturned

Preview:

"Some meeting, right? What were your thoughts on it?" Winter asked, hoping to coax Qibli into saying more to him

"Yeah. It was interesting, to be sure." the dragon instead responded lamely

Winter narrowed his eyes at the half-hearted answer.

"Indeed. I particularly enjoyed when they talked about *very* obvious and *very* suspicious Sandwings."

"Yeah, that was my favorite part too -" Qibli halted, dazed as he processed the words and flipped back to Winter, guiltily. "They didn't really talk about that did they?"

Winter brazenly smirked triumphantly, "No. But it did prove a point."

Winter awoke the next morning, his usual disdain relenting as the memory from the night before returned to him. His worries about Moon and the explosion seeming ever so slightly less significant than they had yesterday.

He even discovered that he found him looking forward to the day.

He instinctively looked to Qibli's bed to find it, as usual for this time, empty. Nothing but a cold pile of sand without his warmth.

Winter stared, too impatient to wait, he decided to take the initiative and find Qibli. Luckily, it wouldn't be too hard - few other dragons were awake at such an offensive and undragonly early

hour.

Qibli had his wings bent away as he steadied water-logged wings away from himself, returning from his morning flight moments before Winter had spotted him.

When Winter approached Qibli, his eyes flickered to glance at him distractedly before returning and stayed locked on him wondrously. His jawline framed by miniscule water droplets as he greeted Winter enthusiastically,

"Hey!" he called unfurling one of his wide wings to invite Winter into his embrace

Winter colored as he lightly approached the Sandwing, accepting his invitation. He briefly wondered, even worried, that Qibli would act differently now that they were officially together but was pleasantly surprised that he remained the same as ever.

"Hey." Winter replied, greeting him with his own uncharacteristically dopey smile as he leaned into their embrace, only to immediately repulse back, temporarily disgruntled that he was wet before sighing grudgingly. He shook his head in mock disapproval at Qibli.

"Why you went flying in the rain is beyond me. Sometimes I'm utterly shocked when I remember that you're a Sandwing."

Qibli snorted, grinning. His eyes glinting with mischief as he daintily retorted, "It isn't like my morning patrols flying around Scorpion Den or the Sandwing palace, but it's the best I've got. You don't get to guard Queen Thorn by being afraid of a little rain."

Winter rolled his eyes affectionately as Qibli winked at him.

"Is that all you've got going for you?" Winter teased

"Yup," he grinned back cheerily before squinting his eyes in exaggerated contemplation, "That and the fact that my boyfriend is also Queen Glacier's nephew. No big deal, though. I'm not surprised that you didn't know. He keeps that pretty on the downlow." he reached to brush his wings against Winter

"Get your own bragging rights," Winter drawled, speeding up, "Maybe if you keep at it, you'll make it big in your comedic career."

Qibli rushed beside him, humming, "You can't hate a guy for dreaming."

By the time the duo had returned to the central hallway there was, as expected, a scene of grumbling, groggy dragons bustling about. Many of them lugging their heavy tails, their lids bleary with exhaustion. It seemed the only dragon happy to be awake at this hour was Qibli, who hummed a steady tempo to himself, just being himself unapologetically. His alert eyes darting about to the dragons observing them before he stared off blankly.

Winter noticed his distractedness but decided not to comment on it. Qibli had accepted Winter and his many moods in their many forms and Winter was prepared to do the same for Qibli despite it seeming so unusual. Whatever it was, if Qibli was struggling, he had a place in Winter.

After all, they were boyfriends now.

Winter smiled to himself as Qibli chuckled quietly beside him. Winter looked over, raising a brow at him.

"It's different calling someone your boyfriend when they actually are." he observed amusedly

Winter nodded his agreement, "That's true. Luckily, you've had a lot of practice calling me it." he answered cheekily earning a smirk from Qibli.

As they passed their now darkened dorm, Winter with a start realized how much he missed the rosy, moody colors. He had taken them down shortly after Qibli had fallen asleep. Leaving them up for longer than intended only because Qibli had liked them, comparing them to colorful comets, planets and stars. As he returned the globes to their spots in the hallway, he silently thanked them for their services.

Now their dorm appeared ordinary, average, even - but the two

knew it was anything but that. It became a shared experience.

"I was just calling it how it was," Qibli continued as they passed, "Who knows? Maybe I can see the future," he quipped, before hurriedly adding, "or maybe I planned it all along."

Around the bend of the corridor, a group of dragons had begun to crowd around the announcement chalkboard. Some waiting for their friends - others peered curiously up at the writing, and Qibli was already snaking his way through the crowd of onlookers to peer up at it, too.

Winter waited away from the crowd, watching as the Sand dragon mouthed the words to himself and nodded, turning to relay the news to Winter.

"Qibli?" a familiar voice called.

Qibli whipped around only to be met with a familiar Nightwing, his face instantly registered his delight. Meanwhile, the realization of the Nightwings identity dawned upon Winter and he quickly made to leave.

"Moon!" Qibli cried, grinning

Winter had forgotten that he'd have to deal with Moon today.

His mind still spun, set in its stubbornness, but he knew he couldn't avoid it for much longer. He'd have to confront her head on.

Besides, shouldn't he of all dragons understand how necessary hearing the full story in a situation was?

Winter forced his feet to remain rooted in his spot as Qibli and Moon exchanged pleasantries which quickly devolved into whispers under the commotion. He watched for their reactions, gauging the conversation based on their facial expressions, but they too remain ambiguously neutral.

They stood chatting in place for a moment longer, leaving Winter awkwardly clipping shoulders with other dragons until three gongs sounded through the halls, signaling the end of morning free time.

Winter indignantly huffed, ruffling his wings as Qibli and Moon finally sidled up alongside Winter.

"There's an assembly in the Great Hall," Qibli informed, his tone unusually somber, "most likely about the explosion yesterday. That should go over well."

Winters faced morphed into alarm, temporarily ignoring Moon he asked worriedly, "You don't think they're sending us home? I mean the explosion was bad, but not enough to kick us out."

Qibli shrugged, Moon stepped forward and piped in, "They don't want to send us home, but they're worried that WE might want to."

Winter lifted his chin haughtily as he said, "Well, they can rest assured that I'll let them know if I want to. They don't need to make decisions for me."

Moon sighed and wilted, "Poor Sunny, and poor Clay. Out of everyone, they were the most excited for this."

Qibli nodded sympathetically, wordlessly guiding them through the crowd into the already packed Great Hallway.

Stood on a platform were the Prophecy Dragonets, stood on a raised dais in the middle was Tsunami with her signature frown with a fidgeting Starflight and Fatespeaker to her right and a moping Sunny and Clay on her other.

Wow, Winter mused, *this can't be good.*

Tsunami stepped aside to allow Sunny to address the elephant in the room first. She promised that the school wouldn't be immediately closing, contrary to Winters fears.

He looked to Qibli, joyously relieved, hoping to catch his black eyes brimming with happiness in return.

Instead, he and Moon stood closely together, whispering.

Winter furrowed his brow, choosing to ignore it for now.

So what if he was being left out from something? it made his life easier when he was involved in less problems than he already was.

But as the speeches ramped up and droned on, Winter continued stealing frequent glances at the two, watching as they slowly shuffled further into the crowd until they had eventually pivoted somewhere entirely else altogether.

Winter shifted on his talons, at long last his pent-up anger announcing itself.

There are already far too many secrets going on, he grouched, sweeping the room with his eyes searching for a golden head to no avail.

He hunched, resigned to confronting them after the assembly.

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When the meeting was over (thankfully), Winter hurried after a pair of black and yellow dragons who pursued after a group of Sandwings with avid briskness.

"Hello, Qibli." Winter drawled once he was close enough to them.

The yellow dragon froze, shifting impatiently on his talons, his eyes tracking his targets departure with exasperation.

"Winter!" he acknowledged distractedly, glancing between Moon and the group of Sandwings

Moon shook her head at him.

"Some meeting, right? What were your thoughts on it?" Winter asked, hoping to coax Qibli into saying more to him

"Yeah. It was interesting, to be sure." the dragon instead responded lamely

Winter narrowed his eyes at the half-hearted answer.

"Indeed. I particularly enjoyed when they talked about *very* obvious and *very* suspicious Sandwings."

"Yeah, that was my favorite part too -" Qibli halted, dazed as he processed the words and flipped back to Winter, guiltily. "They didn't really talk about that did they?"

Winter brazenly smirked triumphantly, "No. But it did prove a point."

Qibli sighed. "That was clever. Point taken." He turned to Moon expectantly.

"I have to tell him." She whispered, nodding, "He needs to know."

"Know what?" Winter asked, his voice drowned out by the other dragons' conversation.

"It'll be fine," Qibli assured her, "he won't bite. He may snarl, though."

Moon smiled gratefully at him, drawing in a meditative breath she turned to Winter meaningfully,

"Winter. there are a few things you need to know about me." she began, her expression already reflecting exhaustion, "I can read minds and see the future." she summarized slowly as Winters eyes widened. "Do you have any questions so far?"

"Um, yes!" Winter protested before reminding himself to take a breath and to sort out his words carefully.

How do I say 'that's impossible. Everyone knows Nightwings have lied about their powers and secrets for centuries to make up for their incompetence' in a ... kinder... way? How can I say that to her when I'm supposed to trust her and be a friend?

He looked between two sets of hopeful eyes while he detangled his words. Eventually, he hesitantly asked,

"So... you're telling me that the Nightwings *weren't* lying and that you've been reading my mind the entire time?"

He evaluated her, looking her in the eye as he searched for traces of malice or deception.

She gently shut them as she sighed morosely. "Yes, yes to be both. But it wasn't really something I could help - I honestly don't try to do it on purpose!"

Winter scraped at the ground agitatedly at the confirmation of his biggest concern.

The one thing that he'd be hoping specifically NOT to be true was, and now his two friends were depending on him to just accept it.

And he would, reluctantly.

Wait, was she using past tense? Or was he imagining it?

"Is there any way I can block my thoughts?" he sensibly inquired, deciding it was worth a shot to ask

"Well, actually, yes," she answered. Winter and Qibli perked interestedly, "That was what I was going to bring up next. I wanted to give these all to you at the same time, but this actually might work better."

She hurriedly dug around in her satchel as they peered closely, watching her.

Winter shifted closer to Qibli who stared, with genuine confusion, as Moon pulled two small black pebbles from her pouch and offered them with an outstretched talon.

Winter shot them an appraising look while Qibli immediately grabbed one to inspect. They were ordinary - perhaps even more of an eyesore than normal. Their sooty, gloomy appearance seemed to steal the sunrays beaming in through the open windows and banish them into its darkness.

"No thanks," he answered modestly, pushing her talon away, "I

already have enough...rocks."

Without looking up, Qibli snorted.

"It's a Skyfire rock," she explained patiently, "when you have it with you, it muffles your thoughts from any mind readers. I want you to have one. You're my friend, and you're entitled to your own privacy."

When she offered the rock again, Winter snatched it, throwing it into his own pouch.

To test its effectiveness, he screamed in his head, "MOON!"

She looked completely unaffected as he rubbed his now throbbing head.

Pleased that it worked, he nodded appreciatively at her. She only smiled softly in return.

Qibli, meanwhile, was utterly enthralled by the rock. Turning it over in his palm he asked,

"Where did you get this?"

"They're the stones from Turtles armband," she said, conjuring a memory of the forgettable dragon into Winters mind. If he strained himself, he could just barely remember the jewelry she was talking about. "I noticed I couldn't hear his thoughts - they were always just a quiet hum - so I asked to see it. He told me that he found pieces of it in the ocean a few months ago."

Winter chuckled, "Are we sure that it's not because there's nothing going on in his head?"

Qibli stepped on his tail.

"Okay." Qibli relented, stuffing it carefully into his own bag. "Can we please catch up to those Sandwings? We need to find out who's responsible for the explosion."

Winter suddenly felt that just as he was starting to catch up in the

conversation, he was plunged back into the abyss of misdirection and confusion. He turned his head curiously at Moon.

"We're trying to find the culprit for the explosion that happened yesterday." she elaborated as they began to follow the Sandwings original route.

"And you think it's a Sandwing?" Winter echoed, emphasizing his doubt

"I don't know," Qibli replied, his voice taking on an uncertain lilt, as though he were suddenly doubting himself, "how else would they know how to use a dragonflame cactus as a bomb?"

"How about the war?" Winter argued, "ANY dragon who worked with or fought against the Sandwings could know what they are and how they work. Especially when there's one being thrown at them."

Truthfully, Winter had just been making wild guesses, guesses he hoped would earn him more insight on their already established knowledge and suspicions. Instead, his argument had been enough to make Qibli and Moon stop in their tracks to consider it seriously.

"That's true..." Qibli acknowledged, turning to Moon, "Have you seen anything in their thoughts?"

She shook her head, "They've all been normal; mainly just sympathetic and anxious. Nothing that particularly says, 'I-just-killed-two-dragons-yesterday'."

"But uh," she continued nervously, "We do have a few other suspects, though."

Chapter 17 - Sweet Talk

Preview:

Before he could reach her, a thunderous creak echoed through the cave, drawing everyone's attention to a large stalactite that dangled dangerously from the ceiling until it surged towards a perched Icewing.

Icicle? Winters mind clicked, *THREE MOONS! That's going to stab her! She's going to die!* his head screamed

He flew forward, beating his wings frantically. He needed to reach her so he could push her out of the way!

She's going to die! his head roared with every slow wingbeat

"But uh," Moon mumbled nervously, peering shyly at at Qibli and Winter, "We do have a few other suspects, though."

"Oh?" Winter asked, raising an astronomically highbrow in surprise, "Go on, don't hold back on my account."

Moon shifted uncomfortably, as though she were nervous about telling him. Though, Winter couldn't imagine why. Who was he to intervene in the catching a culprit?

Qibli threw a wing around him, he glanced at Moon, a smirk plastered on his face as he encouraged her,

"Maybe he can use his genius Icewing brain to help us out, he's not entirely a lost cause."

Winter barked out a laugh, a smirk appearing on his own features as he pushed Qibli off,

"You're only noticing how incredibly useful I am now?"

Qibli made a face and detached himself from Winters wing to instead pace between him and Moon, who chewed her lip contemplatively.

"Qibli," she offered, "the only other reservations we had were about Sora, Flame, and..." she glanced at Winter sheepishly, "and Icicle."

Winter immediately flared his wings aggressively.

"My sister is NOT some cowardly murderer!" he growled lowly

"So she's just... a murder of the regular sort?" Qibli asked with a knowing tone

"She's not one at all!" Winter cried in indignance, "She's just... not very open-minded. Or approachable. And slightly menacing. That's all."

Qibli grunted in polite acknowledgment and a exchanged a dubious look with Moon.

It was true that Icicle was never accused of being the *kindest* dragon around, but she still had her moments of goodness. At least Winter hoped so.

Winter recalled when he, Icicle, and Hailstorm were out on a hunting trip when they were younger, and Icicle had seen Winter struggle to spear a polar bear and she came to help.

Winter frowned to himself as he played through the memory, *didn't she get the credit for the kill? She got to take my spot beside Glacier that night.*

He cringed. *Okay, so maybe not then.*

But what about when during the war, when Winter had been flanked on all sides by Mudwings, Icicle had swooped through with

gleaming claws, and raked the throats of any Mudwings in her path? Didn't that temporarily distract his group of attackers?

He shivered, remembering how her gleeful cackle had even distracted him. It rang out maliciously as she confidently slashed and froze Mudwings by the dozen, red on cool blue.

So maybe Icicle wasn't the best, she had her share of despicable deeds, but even this was below her. Or so he hoped.

"Flame I could believe," Winter continued, desperately looking for a change in subject, "shockingly, he's not the friendliest dragon in the world."

Moon nodded her agreement, "He has a complicated brain."

"Not surprising." he scoffed

"So it's Flame after all?" Qibli asked, his thoughtful eyes stared ahead, processing the information intently.

"No, no. I don't think it was him, or anyone else we've suspected so far." she eyed Winter cautiously, as though he were a bomb prone to explosion, "Including Icicle."

"Obviously." he snorted in relief

"They all think about the explosion like someone else did it," she continued

"Well, somebody had to do it. The cactus didn't just randomly decide to spontaneously combust into flames and kill two dragons," Qibli insisted, "Can't we look a little more into them?"

Moon sighed; she looked as though she were deliberately biting back important information as she shook her head slowly. She suggested, "How about we go to the dining hall and split up for now?"

"Really? Qibli asked bewildered, "Doesn't going there overwhelm you?"

She smiled softly as she gestured for them to follow her, "No. Besides, it'll give us some time to think more. We'll regroup later."

Then they finally parted ways with nothing more than a wave.

Winter slid up to prey center to kill a goat for himself. Qibli followed behind him, allowing Winter to guide them into the far corner of the room to dine privately.

It wasn't until they sat where Winter's eyes snapped to Qibli's empty talons. He hadn't caught himself anything to eat.

"You're not eating?" Winter observed with sharp concern. It wasn't unusual for Qibli to not eat a lot, but he was never one to turn down a meal.

"I don't like to eat when I've got a lot on my mind." Qibli justified. He wrapped his barbed tail around his talons stiffly.

Winter furrowed his brows, putting his food down to reassure him. "There's nothing for you to be nervous about," he carefully sliced a piece of his goat to share with Qibli. "Between Moons all-knowing mind-reading abilities and your brains, the culprit might as well have 'murderer' stamped on their head."

He set the goat limb before the other dragon, peering at Qibli hopefully.

"I just can't help but feel I'm missing something." he explained, pushing the goat limb away from him, "And as you know, that never happens." he shot winter a small, unsure smile

"Like maybe I'm not investigating thoroughly enough. I should be better than this. I *need* to be better than this."

Winter frowned, Qiblis words echoing through his skull, phrases so eerily similar to the ones Winter used to tell himself after Hailstorms death that Winter momentarily thought he had misheard Qibli. But the frustrated downward curl of his snout confirmed what he had said.

Winter chewed through his consideration until he offered,

"It seems like you've put unnecessary pressure on yourself."

"I have to!" Qibli argued, "If we want the school to stay open, then I need to figure this out. I mean, Moon can read minds! This shouldn't be rocket science for me. But it is."

Winter glanced at his meal, suddenly finding it unappealing. He looked Qibli in the eye, giving him his full attention.

"That's not true," Winter declared unexpectedly, "this isnt something you have to solve alone. Moon and I will help you."

His eyes twinkled with passion at Qibli, whose expression matched the book-definition for "frazzled". It was clear that his mind raced a million miles a minute and that he was along for the ride.

Winter grabbed Qiblis talons and pulled him closer,

"I will help you," he repeated, because it was worth repeating, "Would talking about it help? Who do you think did it? " He asked

Qibli hesitated before admitting,

"Sora or Flame."

Winter listened keenly and nodded sympathetically when he felt was right, although he was skeptical to say the least.

Sora? Clay's timid sister? No chance. But I suppose any dragon could be a suspect when murders involved, he rationaled,

But why her? There were more devious dragons than Sora that would kill in a heartbeat given the chance.

Like Icicle.

"I'm still figuring out how Scarlet would have gotten in contact with either of them, though" Qibli rambled, "but how would Sora know to arrive after the explosion? She doesn't seem to like her Winglet. Was it targeted? But also, Flame hates everything - how far would he be willing to go to prove it? Would he -"

Winter held a talon out to Qiblis snout to slow the influx of information spilling from him.

He gripped his throbbing head, how did Qibli do this to himself?

"Queen Scarlet?" Winter comprehended once he processed Qiblis words, "The exiled Skywing queen? What does she have to do with this?"

As Qibli opened his mouth to speak, Winter shook his head, deicing, "Actually, never mind. We can talk about it later."

He hauled himself up straight and stated firmly,

"For now, you need to give yourself a break. I'm shocked that your brain hasn't melted yet. It'll help to clear your thoughts and come back to this later, trust me."

He pushed Qiblis part of the goat back to him as he scooted beside him to wrap a comforting wing around Qibli. "Can you do that? Just for a minute, let yourself rest. You have plenty of time later to worry about it."

Qibli snuggled into Winter, tucking his snout into Winters shoulder with a sigh.

"You're right. Thanks."

Cautiously, Winter rested his chin on Qibli's forehead careful of his horns. He listened as Qibli took alternating deep breaths that echoed throughout him.

Winter was content to remain like this, beside Qibli. Together as though the world around them couldn't touch them. Unfortunately that was not possible. Qibli finally pulled back and greedily picked up his piece of goat, seeming to have regained his appetite.

Winter smiled, relieved and slightly surprised that Qibli was trying to take his advice.

Not wanting to distract Qibli from his state of mind-serenity, he allowed Qibli to guide the conversation, filling the comfortable

silence with whatever he found most significant to say in the moment.

"Who knew you could actually give some decent advice?" Qibli grinned after a while, "Maybe I AM thawing your ice-cold heart."

Winter guffawed, looking away while he barked out his laugh. He abruptly froze, when he finished, his eyes were trained on a black figure sitting uncomfortably nearby.

Qibli hadn't noticed Moon yet and was instead chewing his food happily.

"Too late." he said in-between mouthfuls

Moon was ahead, frozen in alarm at something.

She must have just learnt something.

Winter hoped that Qibli wouldn't notice her looking panic-stricken, especially right when he was starting to ease up.

He acted on instinct, muttering a lie about being hungry for more prey, before dashing over to Moon to ask what she'd just found out.

Before he could reach her, a thunderous creak echoed through the cave, drawing everyone's attention to a large stalactite that dangled dangerously from the ceiling until it surged towards a perched Icewing.

Icicle? Winters mind clicked, *THREE MOONS! That's going to stab her! She's going to die!* his head screamed

He flew forward, beating his wings frantically. He needed to reach her so he could push her out of the way!

She's going to die! his head roared with every slow wingbeat

Moon shrieked, grabbing his tail and holding it tightly to prevent him.

He growled and yanked himself free. However, when he turned to

start flying once more, Icicle had dived out the way, narrowly avoiding her death.

Winters heart hammered; he watched as his sisters faced contorted into her usual one of severe exasperated disgust as chaos erupted around her.

Winter pushed his way through the surrounding dragons, sneaking a look back at Qibli who was already up and running towards him and Moon.

Sorry, Qibli, winter thought ruefully while he elbowed a path to his sisters, *this must be my boyfriend-scaring chaos-causing bad luck.*

"Icicle!" he shouted once he reached her, "Are you alright? I can't believe that happened to you!"

"EVIDENTLY!" she yelled, delicately stepping away from the rock shards, her tail lashing with fury, "What do you think?! No, I'm not alright! Someone just tried to kill me!"

She whirled around to glare at him.

"And YOU are the last dragon I want to see!" She bit, "Go kiss your Sandwing or something and leave me ALONE! I almost died! I don't need you fretting over me."

"WHAT?!" he roared indignantly, flushing, "I'm trying to help you! Why do you make everything impossible?"

Moon and Qibli rushed in from behind with Clay in tow, putting an end to their bickering.

"Oh my!" he gasped, "I'm so sorry! I'm so relieved that you're alright. This stalactite must have accidentally gotten too unstable and fallen down." he placated

"Ha! Hardly!" Winter spat angrily, waving a wing at the guilty stalactite that lay cracked beside them, "Some accident! Someone intentionally rigged it to fall on her!"

"Exactly!" She agreed

He seethed, anger taking over his fear. Now that Icicle was alive, he needed to crack down and find out who it was.

"Winter," Moon hissed, rapidly waving for him to huddle in with her and Qibli.

Winter reluctantly stepped away, listening as Icicles voice carried,

"And I'll tell you what else! That bomb yesterday was probably meant for me, too! This is unacceptable! I'M being targeted! Only one dragon knew where I was yesterd-"

His eyes caught the way hers lit with realization as she growled out, "And I'll make *her* pay."

"Winter!" Qibli beamed, throwing his wings around him once he was close enough. He gave him a brief once-over before his voice hardened,

"Why can't I look away for even a minute without you nearly getting yourself killed or to see you in the process of nearly killing somebody else?"

"I'm high in-demand." Winter shrugged nonchalantly

He gripped Winter tighter, "What if Moon didn't stop you? You'd be crushed beneath a giant rock right now, dead! Is that really a death befitting of Queen Glaciers nephew?"

Winter allowed himself to smile slightly at Qiblis concern, "What are you, my dad? I'm fine! Entirely alive and well. Has anyone ever told you that you worry about others too much?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you get stuck in deadly situations too much?" he retorted, "Seriously! It's like you attract them or something!"

Winter darkened, knowing he was right. His personal superstitions regarding his bad luck were not unfounded.

Moon cleared her throat awkwardly as she added, "What Qibli means is that we're both very happy that you're okay!"

"And that you're an idiot." Qibli reaffirmed

"How endearing."

"I think I know who's behind this!" Moon spoke up suddenly, quickly trying to rush her words out.

"Oh, good! Because I do, too." Winter agreed, pulling away from Qibli

Qibli looked at him skeptically, "And you figured it out... how, exactly? By nearly being impaled by a stalactite?"

"Didn't you hear what Icicle said? She thinks someone purposely set off that explosion before class yesterday because she was supposed to be there early. And only because she told them. In the past, she's only ever mentioned to me about her speaking with one dragon."

Qiblis eyes widened, his brain no doubt working through a new idea. "If someone is targeting Icicle, it has to be someone who hates her, but also someone she talks with fairly often. Which means... was I right?" he looked to Moon hopefully

"Yes." she answered immediately, "I saw it flash through Icicles head - only Sora knew that she would be early to history yesterday. And Sora KNEW that the stalactite would fall - she planned for it to."

Winters eyes widened. Sora really was attempting to assassinate Icicle. But why? They've already met!

"I have to find Sora before Icicle does." Moon decided urgently. She spun around and hurried down the hall, presumably following a trail of thoughts to Sora.

"Um, hello? Shouldn't we tell the Prophecy Dragonets? Shouldn't we tell Clay? It's HIS sister!" Winter protested

But it was too late, Moon had turned the corridor and was already bounded out of sight.

"Come on," Qibli prompted, "We can do that while she alerts Sora."

Somehow Winter felt he was doing Icicle a disservice by assisting in Sora's escape.

But we came here to end an era of war, not reinvent it and let it divide us more.

Chapter 18 - An Icewings New Start

Preview:

Winter startled back, his head pounding. His tongue felt heavy, he couldn't think of anything to say, any way to console her.

His heart thumped to the thoughts of,

My fault. My fault. My fault. Hailstorm is dead, and it's my fault.

But this time, a softer, newer voice seemed to wrap warm wings around Winters brain, mellowing it out, and freeing him from the chain of repetitiveness.

You didn't kill Hailstorm. Queen Scarlet did.

Winter and Qibli bounded through a series of endless corridors. They stuck their heads into alternating rooms, hoping to catch a glimpse of the familiar caramel Mudwing who seemed so close, yet so far away, in their moment of panicked misdirection.

"Let's check the prey center! Maybe he's still with Icicle?" Qibli suggested optimistically, he twined his tail with Winters to pull him along.

Doubt it. Winter privately thought, *Icicle acts fast and merciless. Just the way father trained her to.*

The two eventually stumbled into the prey center and looked around, they weaved in between dragons and craned their necks over the tops of assorted dragon heads.

Qibli pushed his way back to the scene of the attempted assassination while Winter waited impatiently.

A moment later, he returned.

"Well?" Winter demanded

The Sand dragon shook his head disappointedly.

"Then where is he?" Winter roared, gripping at his horns furiously, his mind scrambling for possible places they've missed

It had only been a few minutes! Where could he have possibly gone?

"Um, where is who?" a quiet voice chimed in, just barely loud enough to be heard over the crowd

Winter whirled to the source of the voice, not expecting to be greeted by a timid Turtle. He momentarily faltered, wondering how Turtle could have possibly been in the same winglet as him, yet Winter frequently forgot of his existence. It was a new level of undercover that Winter couldn't fathom.

"None of your concern! Stay out of it!" Winter snarled as an instinctive response. He immediately turned on his heel to leave.

What if everyone figures out that we're helping a convict escape? Am I really alright with that?

Turtle flinched at Winter's unnecessary aggressive response, somehow seeming to shrink even further into the ground. His eyes avoided Winters cold ones, instead he stared intently at the ground bashfully.

"We're looking for Clay, have you seen him?" Qibli amended in an urgent, but infinitely kinder tone

"Oh! Um," Turtle thought, his scales glowing methodically in sync to his thinking, "I think I just saw him heading towards the medical ward a few minutes ago. He was looking pretty glum and all, especially after what happened."

Winter listened impatiently, waiting for the moment Turtles rambling would stop so he could grab Qibli and go. He flicked his

tail to catch the light, hoping to get the Sand dragons attention.

And he did.

He jerked his head to the archway exasperatedly, his brows lowering as he anxiously thought,

By the Moons, can you be ANY slower next time, Turtle?

Qibli caught Winters cue and thanked Turtle for his help, before the pair hurried out of the room, leaving behind a stunned Turtle who just mumbled something quiet in response.

"Any idea where the medical ward is?" Winter asked Qibli once they started running again.

As they ran, the number of passing dragons began dropping, becoming sparse and littered at random intervals. Eventually, the only sounds in the hallway were of thumping feet and beating hearts. The sight of it gave Winter dé·jà vu.

Has it really only been a week since they arrived at Jade Mountain for the first time?

One week since Winter and Qibli first strolled in these halls looking for their dorms? Never anticipating that in a weeks' time, that they would be playing a part in preventing a murder and helping a killer escape?

As he thought more about it, Winter was surprised that he didn't yearn more for a simpler time, or at least a time where he wasn't panicked about mind-reading powers or vengeful dragons.

But even back then, wasn't he always weighed down by something, too?

And as he ran side by side with Qibli, whose face glittered with slick sweat and determination, he knew he couldn't - and wouldn't ever want to go back.

Back to the loneliness, the superficiality, the family expectations. To the feeling that he was waiting for something to happen, waiting for

some grand destiny to shape his life.

Maybe this is what I've been waiting for all my life, he thought, distracted by his new infatuation of studying Qibli.

"This way!" Qibli cut in through his thoughts, upping his pace to stay ahead of Winter

Qiblis muscles worked in perfect harmony, like a well-oiled cog machine. Deliberate movements and swings moving forward and backwards without deviation. As he moved, Winter was able to see just how bad the damage from the explosion was: small, irritated wounds littered his wings and right side of his body, marked-up from where Qibli had pulled the cactus splinters from.

Winter frowned. The wounds would heal, certainly. But it still peeved him to see them.

His amber teardrop earring swung and caught the late-morning sun. It scattered small rainbow projectiles onto the walls and nearby surfaces.

It reminded Winter of the lights Qibli had loved so dearly.

He shook his head to make the thought vanish.

He instead opted to focus his energy into keeping his legs pumping. Qibli was able to leap about with ease, however Winter who was much more accustomed to running on the slippery cold or ice, found it difficult to keep his legs from tiring as fast.

Then, Qibli abruptly halted to a stop.

Winter finally caught up, noticing too late that Qibli had frozen before he thwacked into his warm wing with a muted 'thunk'

Winter clutched his head frowning as he looked around.

They had come to a stop in front of the library. The wide entranced yawned open painting the ground around their talons in neon green shade. The smell of old scrolls and wet canopy leaves wafted into the hallway. Despite what Winter saw, he felt a sense of

formidability towards the room.

The room emanated with a tense eeriness, like the long, menacing tension formed between a predator and its prey.

"I didn't want to be the one to say this, but this isn't the medical ward." Winter said, craning his neck to see what Qibli had stopped to peer at.

Inside the library sat Starflight at his librarians' desk, as expected. However, unexpectedly, was a dazzling white dragon who crept up slowly behind him, their talons extended with malice and bloody intent as they twitched towards his neck.

Starflight appeared on-edge, even if he couldn't quite place the danger. He sat stock-still, purely petrified.

That kind of looks like Icicle, he observed off-handedly, squinting his eyes to get a better look at the dragon. At once, the full weight of his observation had taken hold of him, and he was filled with alarm.

That looks EXACTLY like Icicle about to kill Starflight!

Qibli must have drawn the same conclusion, because he barreled into the library in one swift leap.

"Behind you, Starflight!" Winter shouted, running in after Qibli

Qibli had landed on top of Icicle, who had whipped around and tried to slash at Qiblis underbelly in failure.

After a brief moment of hisses and tussling, Qibli had pinned her down. Pinning her so she could stare with intense loathing right into his eyes.

And he didn't even flinch.

Icicle snarled and snapped her jaws at Qibli, her snout radiated with the harsh chill of oncoming frost breath, and before she could launch a bout of it, Winter dashed over and clamped her mouth shut.

"Don't do anything stupid," he warned his sister

Icicle glared up with silent fury in response. Her eyes alone conveyed more than enough of her severity and anger. They cut in, digging harshly into Winters as though to say,

'Could say the same to you.'

Qibli bared his teeth and looked around, evaluating the room in its entirety.

"What's going on?" Starflight cried, "What is it? Who's behind me? Why have you all gone silent?"

Ignoring him, Winter growled, "We're not going to kill you, Icicle. But you need to promise the same for us. We want answers, and you're in a position to be giving them."

"Icicle?" Starlight echoed, "You...? But why?"

"Let's find out," Qibli nodded to Winter. Silent permission for Winter to cautiously remove his talon from around Icicles snout, granting her the courtesy to immediately use her first words to insult him.

Qibli reapplied faint pressure on her throat with a talon, a threat that Winter hoped would remain empty.

"Icicle, what are you doing?" Winter repeated incredulously, "What's going on? Let's talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about." she snapped back, "I'm fixing YOUR mistake. Or at least I was trying to."

Winter stared back in bewildered confusion, "MY mistake?" he echoed furiously, "Tell that to your talons that were LITERALLY about to strangle Starflight!"

Starflight made a tiny squeak of horror, before he cleared his throat.

"Icicle, he's right. You haven't done anything wrong yet. We can still talk about this!"

"I thought you were trying to kill Sora, not Starflight." Qibli prompted, hoping to clear up his confusion

"No, you sand snorter!" she shouted at him, before turning her fury on Winter "The Nightwings did it! The Nightwings killed Hailstorm! Don't you remember?" she cried, her screams eventually building up to an all-out shriek.

Winter startled back, his head pounding. His tongue felt heavy, he couldn't think of anything to say, any way to console her.

His heart thumped to the thoughts of,

My fault. My fault. My fault. Hailstorm is dead, and it's my fault.

But this time, a softer, newer voice seemed to wrap warm wings around Winters brain, mellowing it out, and freeing him from the chain of repetitiveness.

You didn't kill Hailstorm. Queen Scarlet did.

By admitting this fact and repeating it over and over to himself, the full weight of it slowly sank in. Strangely, it knocked the mental boulder from Winters head that had prevented rational thoughts when it came to Hailstorm, for years he and everyone else avoided the topic, deeming it social taboo. This reinforced Winters belief and firmly rooted him in a pit of guilt where despair clawed at him, on some days trying to drag him down into the bottomless void of anguish.

Now, for the first time in years, he felt ready to challenge this guilt. To accept Hailstorms death, not as his own fault, but as an unfortunate circumstance out of his control.

"I seem to remember Queen Scarlet being the one who captured him and force him to kill in her arena." he replied, in a much softer tone than he'd meant, "The Nightwings might have been the ones to kill Hailstorm, but Scarlet would have eventually, too. It certainly wasn't Starflight or Moon's fault." he gulped.

How can you justify killing an innocent Nightwing to avenge Hailstorms death when we know he wouldn't have wanted that?" he

asked even quieter

Qibli turned to offer a small reassuring smile, granting Winter his sympathy and strength.

"Hailstorms not dead," Icicle suddenly blurted in a rush, her voice cracking miserably. "Queen Scarlet still has him. She wants an eye for an eye.

Don't you see? I have to kill him."

Winter squeezed his eyes shut. Trying to block out Icicles droning voice. He began to peel off more and more layers of his confusion until he could reach the truth. And once he did, his mind shattered. The guilt that haunted him for years suddenly came back full force, digging in its heels.

Hailstorm was alive. Winter spent years agonizing over his alleged 'death' while he was being tortured somewhere.

Winter should have searched better.

"What?" Winter croaked, "He's alive?!

From beside him, Qibli's jaw slung open as he put the pieces together in his head to form his own understanding of the situation.

"YOU"RE the one working for Scarlet? You're killing the Prophecy Dragonets for her in exchange for Hailstorms freedom, aren't you?"

Winters heart ricocheted painfully.

He wanted Hailstorm back so badly.

He would do anything to get him back.

He would KILL any dragon to get him back.

Which is why he had to take the higher ground now. He didn't want to be that desperate, eager-to-please dragon anymore.

He steeled himself and shook his head sadly, forcing his words out

to be as firm and brave as he could.

"Then I can't let you do that, Icicle."

"Are you sure that there's no other deal that you can make?" Qibli interjected, "With Scarlet, I mean, for Hailstorms life? Preferably one where you don't need to kill Starflight or anyone?"

Winters ears perked in wonderment, his insides going through a rollercoaster of emotions. Flipping between grief and new hope. He peered at Icicle expectantly while she considered Qiblis words.

"I don't think that's possible." She said slowly, "Why wouldn't you want to take the lives of your enemies? The Queen is a very vengeful dragon, obviously. Especially after what that Rainwing did to her face. You have no idea how much she would love to have her head on a stake."

"Sounds like you've put more thought into it than her." Winter seethed, clamping a talon to his head, "So, let me get this straight, you didn't THINK to try and negotiate with her?" he accused irately, "You just accepted the responsibility of killing HER enemies? 'Oh, yes, your majesty! I would love to kill the most influential dragons in Pyrrhia! How did you know?'"

"You don't 'just' negotiate with Queen Scarlet, idiot!" she snapped, "You can mock me after you've done it successfully with your life *spared!*"

And deep down, a piece of him knew that she was right.

Although, he couldn't probably ever bring himself to kill the dragons who had been so encouraging and unfailingly kind to him since he'd arrived, he understood why she would she would've killed for the former Skywing Queen.

Did that make him a bad brother? That he refused to kill anyone else in order to save Hailstorm? Maybe.

But it did make him an okay dragon.

"You're doing the right thing." Qibli whispered, sensing his doubt

Winter took his validation and soaked it in, finally gathering the courage to ask Icicle the question he didn't want to know the answer to.

"Are YOU okay with killing innocent dragons on the basis of a 'maybe' from Queen Scarlet?" he whispered

Icicle froze, her chest heaving. Her eyes darted back to a quivering Starflight.

"I have to." she repeated, "It's the only way."

"It's not the only way, Icicle." Starflight reassured, "We thought the only way to end the war of Sandwing Succession was through violence." he shrugged, just as an odd, fond smile suddenly fought its way onto his face.

"But we chose peace."

"Please, Icicle," Qibli pleaded, "Is there any way you could try asking? You're not a bad dragon. I know you're not."

"And how would you know?" she challenged, "I could claw your face off right now!" she cried in a bout of passion, "I ALMOST just killed Starflight! I've killed HUNDREDS of dragons in the war!"

Qibli leaned backwards and threw her a smirk, he held his talons up calmly in the air.

"That was in war." he argued, "But I took my talons off your throat fifteen minutes ago and you haven't attacked me yet."

Icicle let out a shrill cry, helplessly clawing at her face and curling into a ball to rock herself as she cried.

Winter ran forward to try and stop her, he rested his talons on hers and pulled them away. Revealing Icicle with tears that clouded her vision and streaked down her face, uncharacteristically morose.

"Icicle, it's alright! You're alright! You haven't done anything wrong!" Winter insisted, leaning in closer to her. Her scales emitted a familiar chill to him, that let him know that she was family and

always would be.

"You don't have to be anything you don't want to."

"But my dreams... she'll come visit me." she whimpered, breaking his heart.

"She can't hurt you." he replied fiercely, "if you try making a new deal and that doesn't work, then we'll go search for Hailstorm together."

Qibli looked momentarily surprised by Winters promise, but was quick to offer up his own services, too.

"Okay." she breathed

They all were quiet for a moment, their silence filling the gaps of where words would be. Words seemed too heavy for their current conversation, unbefitting for such tension. Peace spoke louder and kinder than they ever could. And it said all that they needed to know.

Their silence was interrupted by hurried footsteps skidding their way across the hallway. Yells came from beyond the library entrance. Qibli quickly paced over to investigate, barely making it through the doorframe before Moon burst in with Kinkajou hot on her heels.

"Put your talons up! I have deadly venom spit and I will use it!" Kinkajou shouted before halting. Confusion apparent on her face. "Huh? This isn't a deadly situation...."

"Starflight! Look out! She's - oh. You're... alright?"

Moon looked over to where Winter, Qibli and Icicle stood passively and non-violently.

Qibli revealed his talons to Kinkajou teasingly.

"Yup... nothing too murdery going on anymore. Just a couple of friends doing friend things."

"'Anymore'?!" Moon noticed; she echoed it with considerably more alarm

"Relax." Icicle snapped, swishing past Moon in the doorway. She turned to Kinkajou, examining her teeth that dripped with venom. "And don't play with toys you don't know how to use." she tapped Kinkajous snout shut before stalking away.

Kinkajou turned cartoonishly bright red, growling as she ranted,

"Why that -! Doesn't she know that I -"

"I'm so happy you're okay!" Moon yelped, galloping over to envelope Winter and Qibli in her wings

"I was in the medical center with Sora when I suddenly started hearing some really dark thoughts about you guys. And I was so scared because I couldn't hear your thoughts because of the Skyfire. I was so worried you were hurt. I came as quick as I could and, on the way, here I bumped into -"

"She crashed into me!" Kinkajou chimed in, puffing her chest proudly, "I was sooo ready to save you from a scary and mean Icewing. Turns out I didn't have to save you from anything!"

"Right," Moon agreed, "I brought Kinkajou in case it wasn't looking good, but I'm so relieved that it was! It was better than what I ever could have hoped for!" she beamed

Moon lightly brushed her wings against Qibli and Winters wings affectionately. The movement caused Winter to rub his neck awkwardly at the sudden outward display.

"Are you sure you're okay?' she asked again, "I - I thought for sure you were both hurt... or worse."

"We were fine," Winter insisted. He bumped Qibli knowingly, "Icicle wouldn't have killed us, haven't I always said so? Look who was right for a change."

"That's true," Qibli placated a touch too forcefully.

In the corner of Winters eye, he saw Qibli exchange a look with Moon and mouth, 'Thank you.'

"I don't think Icicle would have hurt us, either." Starflight interjected, "I don't think she wanted to hurt us in the first place. That's what makes her different from the other dragons I've been captured or hunted by." he explained, "She even reminded me a little of Tsunami - hot-headed, but not an evil bone in her."

Moon coughed awkwardly at the sentiment. "I'm just happy that you're alright, Starflight."

She glanced around at the mess of scrolls. Shelves were strewn and knocked over haphazardly in the initial scuffle between Qibli and Icicle. Now scrolls lay abandoned on the ground, begging to be picked up and reorganized to the proper spots.

Winter could tell Moon was itching to fix them.

"Sorry about your scrolls." she frowned

Starflight waved an unconcerned talon, "Nonsense. I'd argue that sometimes a talons-on experience is more useful than lessons from a scroll."

He reached about, feeling for a scroll and lovingly picked one up. Upon realizing his defaming words, he quickly counteracted, "Er, but that's not to say that I wouldn't appreciate some help cleaning up. Scrolls are certainly still the safest way to go about learning."

"Of course, Starflight," Moon smiled, "I'll be right over to help in a moment, we're just going to make sure everything's okay with Icicle."

She nodded her head to the doorway, gesturing for the other dragonets to follow her out into the hallway. Once they were out, questions immediately sprang to life, flooding over one another while they talked.

"Wait!" Kinkajou cried, flapping her wings loudly to get their attention, "Okay, Winter and Qibli, let's hear your story first, then we'll tell ours. Sound good?"

Winter quirked an amused brow, surprised that such sensibility was being shown by Kinkajou of all dragons. Qibli inhaled and said much slower and calmly, "Sounds good. Let me restart."

However, it became apparent after a while into Qiblis story explanation that Winter had more to say than he did, so he allowed Winter to take up the charge, only adding or clarifying at points he deemed necessary.

By the end of it, Winter was out of breath, his words came out in soft, heaved pants.

Moon and Kinkajou were stunned into silence.
"Wow," Moon breathed, "That's -" she cut herself off with a blank stare that seemed to glaze over with distance. Like she was listening for tiny whispers of insight.

"That's a miracle." she finished

Winter noticed her hesitation and looked between his companions to see if they had as well. But everyone seemed entirely too caught up in the moment to pay it any mind.

Winter decided to chalk it up to her emotions.

"It's amazing how merciful dragons can become when no one's forcing them to BE something." Qibli commented dryly.
"And Sora? Is she alright? We couldn't find Clay. We got a bit caught up, to say the least." He confessed, before grinning sheepishly

"Yes, Sora is fine. Clay was actually already there to check on her because she'd be so distant and... moody. He and Umber were pretty heartbroken about the news, but they think that this is for the better, too." she said, "Sometimes putting some distance between yourself and your past is the best thing you can do to heal yourself. It gives you some perspective."

Her face shone as her eyes flickered between Qibli and Winter, holding it there for a little longer than he thought ordinary.

Once again, he caught himself wondering how many of his forever

inexplicable and unsaid thoughts had already been viewed by her.

"Wow," Qibli said, breaking the tension with a breathless chuckle, "Who knew that school could be so eventful? And here I was expecting to learn about history and art. Less than a week in and I'm already proven wrong."

"There's a first for everything." Winter deadpanned, but was unable to hold in a chuckle when Qibli groggily turned his way

"I'm a bit tired, too." Moon confessed, "it's been a busy couple of days."

"Now who said anything about being tired?" Qibli grinned, sitting up straight on his haunches "I'm just getting started."

Winter rolled his eyes animatedly, emphasizing,

"It's alright to just say you're tired too, you know."

Qibli smiled, a private smile only for Winter. He winked before nudging his snout tiredly into Winters neck.

Shortly after, Moon excused herself to go help Starflight while she forcefully dragged an accusing Kinkajou behind her, who shouted,

"What! I didn't know you were dating! How come no one told me! Moon?"

When their chatter finally became quieter and quieter, until they were eventually out of earshot, Winter and Qibli turned back to one another. The air buzzed with something different. Not necessarily awkwardness, but it definitely demanded to be talked about. It nagged at the corners of Winters mind, begging him to address it before anything could try to keep them busy and apart again.

"Alright, Outclaw," Winter addressed teasingly, "If you're so awake, do you think we could take this somewhere else to watch the sunset? It's incredibly stuffy in here."

Qibli thumped his chest playfully and grinned.

"I think I can manage that."

Winter smiled and took Qiblis talon in his own. Together, they walked talon in talon to an open archway that would shower them in the dusk light.

They temporarily separated as they launched off, quickly regrouping to fly tightly together in air, soaking in the different temperatures and sensations the other gave off.

After a short flight, the boyfriends touched down on the peak of Agate Mountain right as the sunset was at its best.

Qibli touched down first, rolling into a sitting position while Winter dropped beside him and leaned his full weight against Qibli. He sank into the serenity of the moment, the crickets chirping around them to a tune meant to be heard by only them.

After a while, Winter nudged Qibli to get his attention and mumbled, "Thank you"

He felt Qibli shuffle from beneath him as he gently cocked his head to the side,

"For what?"

"For everything." Winter answered, lifting his head to better look at Qibli. "I'm not sure how I would have handled this without you, honestly." he confessed, fiddling with his talons embarrassedly.

Qibli ran his claws soothingly up and down Winters cold back scales.

"You don't have to thank me for that." Qibli whispered, he felt Qiblis mischievous smile against his ear "I just didn't want to see anything get blown up."

Winter lifted Qiblis face away with his wing, sputtering out a laugh. His face flushed at the close proximity of the two. In response to his movement, Qibli nestled his face into Winters wing. Winter froze and his face burned warmly.

"That's another new shade of blue!" Qibli commented lightly, leaning closer to Winter, "And all I did was what? Put my face near your wing? Now look at you, you poor, poor Icewing prince." he voice husked, a smirk playing delicately on his lips

Winter naturally let himself lean closer until their snouts were only a heartbeat apart.

He could tell Qibli was surprised, too, nervous even.

Qiblis heartrate picked up considerably as Winter approached, drumming like the steady melody of the drums with which he played.

Winter eyed Qiblis snout, trying to distract himself on anything but their mingled breaths. He counted the freckles that dotted themselves along his snout like specks of stars. Or the light, jaded scars that slashed across his face - a testament to his strength and perseverance.

Winter realized with a start that he really wanted Qibli to kiss him.

It was odd how the tables had turned. With Qibli initially asking Winter to pretend to date him, to now Winter wanting Qibli to press his lips against his so desperately.

He wanted to kiss Qibli. But there was something he needed to know first.

"Qibli, promise me that you'll stay by me."

Qibli barely blinked before immediately promising,

"I promise."

Those were the magic words that prompted Winter to press his lips gently against Qiblis. One blue and sandy dragon, display their love for all to see. Their kiss protected by the rays of the sun, full and passionate. Winter gently pulled him in lovingly closer, and only pulled back to allow them to breathe.

One kiss, capable of such hope for their futures.

As they went in for another, Winter smiled against Qiblis snout while he thought,

How fortunate am I by just being here, as I am, with you?

They remained on the mountain, wings slung against one another with their tails entwined. They curled up together, watching the last of the sun fade from beyond the horizon. A shooting star tore across the sky in a hurry, a blazing ball of fire steadily granting wishes.

Winter hurriedly added his own wish, planting it firmly in his mind, determined to make it reality.

Once it had passed, Qibli looked over and asked, "What did you wish for?"

Winter smirked and said slyly, "You'll just have to find out."

Qibli laughed heartily, curling in closer. "Oh, will I?"

Winter reciprocated the affection. Returning his gaze to the darkening sky.

He thought:

I wish for more moments like these.

THE END <3

Authors note:

Hey guys!!! Thank you SO SO much for reading!! Your comments meant the world to me and motivated me to do my best to write each and every one of these chapters to be as good and accurate as possible! It was so much fun! Writing this fanfic has actually taught me a lot about how to better my writing technique and structure, and I hope it shows throughout the chapters! :)

This is to say, writing Qinter fanfics is an incredibly helpful asset to writing B) Can't recommend it enough

I do have another Qinter fic in the works that I'll work on sometime

soon, but for a little while Im gonna take a break! I will be starting school soon, so updates may be slower, but I will be reworking and editing FFGQN chapters every now and then when I can.

And when I do decide to publish the first chapter of my other Qinter AU, I'll let you guys know! :) I'm pretty proud of it!

For now, if you have any suggestions for what I write about next, do definitely let me know! I am open to any other WOF ships or entirely different fandom suggestions so fire away!

Thanks again, everyone! Your support has been incredible, and I hope that you enjoyed! :D

EXTRA! (Part 1)

What a hypothetical draft for a sequel would look like (Winter Turning)! Hope you enjoy!

Sometimes when Winter tried to picture Hailstorm, he couldn't. No matter how hard he focused, something was always slightly wrong. Sometimes Hailstorms graceful snout was too curved or his horns much too large and vicious. Winter could only struggle with the memory so much before the gnawing guilt in his stomach grew too intense.

How could he have replayed the memory of Hailstorms capture so many times, but still misremember the most important details? Like what exact shade of blue were his scales? Or the coarseness of his doting, familiar voice?

Qibli suggested Winter try drawing Hailstorm from what he and Icicle collectively remembered, mentioning how it might finally give Winter some closure.

Winter didn't have the heart to ask Icicle when the memory of Hailstorm already tormented her so much.

Soon after Starflight's botched murder (which Winter and Icicle conveniently left out of discussions with their parents), Clay and Tsunami reluctantly agreed that it'd be best to clear the academy for a few weeks and allow their students to decide whether to return.

At first, Winter was beside himself:

"They can't be serious!" he'd complained to Qibli while the Sand dragon packed. "If all it takes to evacuate the school is one *minor* murder attempt, how do they expect this place to stay open longer than a few weeks?"

Groaning, Winter buried his face into his snow pile. But he didn't mishear Qibli's distinct, quiet snort.

"I'm surprised you aren't more enthusiastic about going home. You'll finally be able to sleep in a bed fit for a king again."

Winter frowned, orienting himself upright so that he could properly glare at Qibli.

Qibli coughed. Keeping his expression neutral as he amended, "Sorry. Bed fit for a prince."

In response, Qibli earned a satin pillow to the face.

Clutching the pillow in his talons, Qibli crept towards Winter with a playful glint in his eye. "Unless..." he said, "no...it can't be! Unless you're going to miss your friends? And me, your devoted and incredibly handsome boyfriend?"

By now, the two dragons were nearly snout to snout with Winters pillow hidden behind Qiblis back (no doubt intended for a sneak-attack). It was all Winter could do to feign disgust as he snarled, "Quite the opposite. Frankly, I'm more worried how you'll manage without me. But that won't be my problem."

Qibli barked out a laugh before dropping the pillow back onto Winters bed.

His heart clenched.

This is what he'd miss the most - these moments with Qibli. Granted, it was only temporary. But how would Winter sleep at night without Qiblis light snores? Or the faint warmth emanating from his side of the room?

How could Winter have ever loathed Qibli like he once had?

"I'll write you every week for advice, don't worry." Qibli continued, returning to his rock and absently cleaning sand off it. "Like, 'Winter, which fork do I use for salads? Or Winter, how do I bow to someone who outranks me?'"

Winter drew his eyebrows together in an attempt to look stern. Turns out, per usual, he couldn't resist the small smile that tugged at his lips whenever he heard Qibli laugh.

"So *now* you're interested," Winter quipped, rolling himself off his bed to whack Qibli. "It's about time. You seem to lack common decency."

Qibli half-heartedly shifted his wings to protect himself from the sudden onslaught of attack. When suddenly, he clasped hold of Winters talon and pulled him in close.

"I know you like me anyway." He smiled, showing stained teeth.

Winters heart thumped. If only Qibli knew how much.

"For what? Being terribly undignified?" Winter smiled back, softly brushing Qibli's cheek. "That won't do. But I suppose you have manners where it matters."

Qibli grinned and his wings fluttered slightly. With a flourish, he spun Winter on his talons and pulled him into a low dip. "Like this, your highness?"

Winter flushed and weakly pushed Qiblis face away. Although, he made no effort to alter their position.

"No. Absolutely not. You look ridiculous." Though, for the hundredth time in a span of ten minutes Winter admired Qibli's ruggedness once more.

Just as Qibli was about to reply (and maybe kiss Winter!), three dragons entered: Moon, Kinkajou, and....Turtle? Slung across Moons chest was a small satchel, but poor Turtle seemed to be saddled with both his AND Kinkajou's bags. His wings sagged beneath the weight, and he panted slightly.

"Hello. Pardon me. Hope it's alright if I -" He paused.

The trio stood momentarily frozen in the doorway before they sprung into reaction.

"Sorry! Hope we aren't interrupting -" Moon began.

"GAH! Guys! At least warn us before you start...canoodling!" Kinkajou shrieked.

Turtle looked away.

Outraged and flustered, Winter yelled, righting himself, "What?! We don't have to warn you about anything! You came into OUR cave! Uninvited!"

Once again, Winter was hit by a pang of unexplainable dread as he was reminded that they'd all soon be separated. He'd never admit it out loud, but Qibli was usually right about Winter and...matters of the heart. Eugh.

As everyone settled in and Qibli entertained Kinkajou and Turtle by regaling them with stories about Queen Thorn and the Sand Kingdom, Moon perched herself beside Winter on his snow pile.

Initially, she winced at the cold. But upon seeing the grim look plastered on his face, she resolved herself to it.

"Not looking forward to returning to the Ice Kingdom?"

Winter flinched, but instead of outright denying it, he grumbled, "You know where I come from, it's considered rude to ask such direct questions."

Moon shrugged, but she didn't seem very repentant.

"Worried?"

Winter snorted. "About what? I'm actually looking forward to a break from this inane school."

Moon smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You've been through...a lot, lately. If you ever want to talk about it..."

"I don't." Winter snapped, fussing over his pet scavenger, Bandit's, cage. When Moon flinched, Winter's reply didn't feel nearly as gratifying as he had hoped. "Don't worry about me. Thanks."

Winter knew Moon could tell he was lying, but she didn't push the subject.

"I hope you find him one day." Moon said sincerely, resting her talon on top of Winter's.

Winter knew she was talking about Hailstorm.

"Well, you would know, wouldn't you?" he replied dryly, not entirely over Moon having prophetic powers.

Moon grimaced. "Okay...well, please don't do anything rash over break. We're here for you."

"Rash like *what*?" Winter asked, feeling entirely too suspicious. But before Moon could even think of answering, she was interrupted.

"Exactly what I've been saying," Qibli chimed in, sauntering over towards Winter. "don't do anything I wouldn't do. And don't do the things I would either."

"Everything you do is foolish, so it won't be that difficult." Winter relented, letting Qibli drape a wing around him.

"If everything I do is stupid, then the smartest thing I did was room with you."

Kinkajou cooed. Winter melted on the inside.

"But I agree," Qibli continued, his tone becoming serious. "Don't do anything crazy, like searching for Hailstorm or something. You need to rest, doctors' orders."

But Winter wasn't listening.

Something inside his mind shifted just then. A new idea had entered his realm of possibility. Sure, Qibli had used searching for Hailstorm as an extreme impossibility. Something *crazy*; but Winter could actually do it, couldn't he? Maybe *this* was the closure he needed. Now that he knew Hailstorm was alive, he could save him -- he could help Icicle heal.

Winter could fix his family.

"Qibli, that might be the second smartest thing you've said all month."

From the corner of his eye, Moon peered at him with a mixture of worry and silent relief. But for once, Winter allowed himself to entertain the notion that he, too, could be brave.